

The Old Order

by FictionalDrifter

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Summary: What if Hiccup and Toothless did leave Berk, during the 'Lightning Strikes' episode? Where would they have gone? Who would they have met? - Read, and find out. {I don't own either of these series, or any of the characters in this story.}

1. Chapter 1

****Dragon Riders: The Old Orders****

****Chapter One****

****Part One "Dragon Perches****

After 300 years of fighting, and several more months of tension " during which the Vikings and dragons strived to coexist, things were finally starting to settle down.

Hiccup's plans for the dragons " having dragons plow fields, and scaring fish out of the water and into the fishermen's nets... to name a few " had been put into effect. As Hiccup had hoped, this had gone a long way towards securing the dragons' place on Berk...

There was only two question left... One: 'How could they stop dragons from accidentally crushing people's houses?', and Two: 'What were they going to do with all the free- time they suddenly had?'... Plowing the fields " which used to take weeks, now took a mere two hours per field. And fishermen had to bring their catch in by midmorning " their boats simply wouldn't hold any more, at that point...

Nobody was surprised to hear that Hiccup had found a solution...

"Dragon- perches!" Hiccup had announced. "The dragons are landing on

our houses because there's nowhere else _for_ them so land. "So: We reinforce the roofs, and add extra supports. We build structures that are designed _specifically_ to withstand and distribute the extra weight!"

The idea turned out to be a... multi- step process. There were a few... 'Roadblocks' " Supports wouldn't hold, and it eventually became clear that wood wouldn't suffice: They needed to use another building material. After some thought, they settled on metal " strong and stable.

Vikings were very efficient builders, and it wasn't long before the work was finished: Every house in the central part of Berk now sat nestled between the new metal beams and support columns...

Then the trouble began: Storm clouds began to gather, and lightening flashed... Some of the bolts hit the metal beams " causing the dragons to scatter " and both dragons and Vikings scattered to find shelter...

****Part Two " Departure****

Three days later...

The storm still had not moved on " and people were beginning to get nervous; murmuring that Thor was angry. Attempts had been made to placate the god, but... nothing seemed to be working.

Then it happened: Toothless had jumped onto one of the perches, and a bolt of lightning had crackled down " narrowly missing Toothless, who'd managed to dodge it in time... Unfortunately, Mildew saw this " and wasted no time, "Did you see that? " The lightning was going after Toothless! Thor's angry because we've been harboring the 'unholy offspring of lightning and death?"

The news spread and before long, a mob had formed " demanding that Toothless be sent away... or even offered as a sacrifice to Thor...

Hiccup, his father " Chief Stoick, Gobber, Astrid, and several others " tried to reason with them, but it soon became clear that they weren't about to back- down... Hiccup tried to explain his recent discovery " that the metal was what was attracting the lightning " but no one believed him...

Finally " Hiccup made up his mind, and both he and Toothless slipped inside Hiccup's house. They gathered what supplies they needed, and then they returned outside. With Stoick's help, Hiccup quieted the crowd, and said, "This won't solve anything " Toothless isn't responsible for the lightning " The lightning is being attracted by the metal. If you want Toothless gone, Fine... but I'm going with him."

There was a moment of stunned silence " Hiccup saw that both Astrid and his father were about to speak, but Hiccup overrode them, "He can't make it on his own " and I wouldn't want him to."

Astrid looked frantic, "But... You'll come back, right?"

Hiccup nodded " though he directed his words to the crowd,

"Eventually... Once all you all realize that this didn't happen because of Toothless. â€" You'll see: The lightning won't stop when we leave!"

With that, Hiccup leapt onto Toothless's back â€" and they took to the air. The crowd turned â€" and watched... As Hiccup grew smaller, and smaller â€" finally vanishing from sight...

—...—

Astrid's P.O.V.

When Hiccup and Toothless finally vanished from view, Astrid felt as though her heart had been torn in two â€" As though something _irreplaceable_ had been taken away from her... '_Hiccup said they'd be back..._' Astrid reminded herself. '_He said they'd be back..._'

She jolted back to reality as thunder boomed, and lightning split the sky â€" hitting more of the metal posts â€" as the storm continued to rage...

Hiccup and Toothless had left Berk... but nothing had changed.

A minute later, Stoick spoke, "I want those dragon- perches taken down _at _once." The Chief's voice was so full of anger that the villagers before him scattered to do as Stoick had ordered.

Then Chief Stoick turned to Mildew, and added, "And if I hear _one more word_ out of you before they're down â€" Thor help me, I'll have your head on a pike." â€" Mildew's eyes widened in obvious fear, and he hurried away.

Stoick, meanwhile, turned to stare of in the direction where Hiccup â€" his son, and Toothless â€" who'd saved his son's life, had vanished...

The following morning...

The Vikings of Berk worked through the night to dismantle the dragon-perches. â€" The anger in their chief's voice was such that no one dared suggest that they stop and resume in the morning...

So it was that when the sun finally began to rise, there were only a few left standing.

When they started, the overall mood was a combination of shock, worry, and disbelief. However, once they'd dismantled nearly half of the metal structures â€" the storm had started to break- up... and there had been fewer and fewer flashes of lightning...

Then a feeling of shame, sadness, and remorse spread â€" as they realized that, once again, Hiccup had been correct... But by now, Hiccup and Toothless were long gone â€" and they knew there would be no catching up to him now...

—...—

Hiccup's P.O.V.

As Hiccup and Toothless flew, Hiccup's head was full of different emotions. He wasn't 'angry' at the villagers â€" They were afraid that they'd angered a _GOD_, after all. â€"â€" He also knew that â€" if he hadn't acted... He decided not to think about what would've happened.

Instead of 'angry', he felt... Tired... tired, and sad â€" Leaving his home had not been easy.

As they flew, Toothless had warbled what Hiccup took to be an apology. He patted the dragon's neck, "This isn't your fault, bud... Mildew's never liked dragons â€" and the others... They were scared. Besides, we're a team â€" and that's never going to change."

They'd stopped on a small island â€" about fifty miles away from Berk. There, they ate and slept. The following morning, they continued to fly in the same direction as before.

Hiccup wasn't sure _why_ they'd picked this direction, but he had a feeling that it was important â€" Somehow...

They continued to hold that course until mid- afternoon â€" when another island appeared ahead of them. As they drew nearer, they saw that it was â€" or seemed to be â€" uninhabited.

When they reached it â€" however, they saw what looked like smoke from a campfire... Cautiously, they approached it â€" finally landing at the far side of the large clearing with the fire was burning...

Next to the fire, a man was sitting on a log. The man was clad in a blue cloak, under which he wore a set of armour.

As soon as Hiccup had dismounted, Toothless surged forward â€" ignoring Hiccup's attempts to call him back...

Hiccup hurried to catch up, and then stopped short â€" stunned by what he was seeing: Toothless had run right up to the man, sniffed at him briefly, then walked to the far side of the fire, and sat on his haunches...

Hiccup approached cautiously, and managed to say, "Uh... Sorry about..." His sentence drifted off as the other man turned to look at him...

The eyes that landed on Hiccup were unlike any that Hiccup had ever seen. They were strong, steady, and seemed as though they could see the very thoughts forming in Hiccup's mind... Then the man spoke â€" in a voice that was both commanding and relaxed, "It's alright â€" I'm quite used to meeting inquisitive young dragons... and some of whom were not nearly as well- behaved as your friend, here." He gestured to the other side of the fire, and Hiccup sat next to Toothless.

Once Hiccup had sat, their unknown host spoke again, "I couldn't help but notice your saddle... and the prosthetic- tail. What happened â€" if I may ask?"

Hiccup hesitated, and then he began to tell the story of how he and Toothless had met, and of everything that had happened since.

When he finally finished, there was a moment of silence. "I see... You've accomplished a great deal, and at a young age, too â€" Impressive."

"And... How did you end up here?" Hiccup had told his story, and it seemed only fair that their _still_ unknown host return the favor.

His first 'answer' was a chuckle, then, "In order to understand my story, I'd have to go further back â€" and explain how earlier events shaped my own life. â€" It'll be a long story..."

For the next hour, the man spoke â€" telling an almost- unbelievable story. First he talked of a war between elves and dragons, and their eventually making peace â€" even binding their two races together with _magic_. How this, in turn, had lead to the rise of the Dragon Riders. (Hiccup didn't fully believe it, but apparently these Dragon Riders were immortal â€" 'unless poison or blade claimed them.) â€"â€" Of how humans had later joined in this spell â€" allowing humans, as well as elves â€" to become Riders.

As their conversation entered its second hour, the tale continued.

Their host told of a Rider â€" Galbatorix, and the thirteen other Riders who he'd corrupted â€" fought and destroyed the others of their order. Then that King Galbatorix had ruled this land â€" Alagaesia â€" for close to a century. How Galbatorix's enemies had united to form the Varden â€" an army dedicated to ensuring Galbatorix's demise.

Of the sapphire- blue dragon- egg the Varden had stolen from Galbatorix, How it came to hatch for a human â€" Eragon. Of the battles he fought in, and the dangerous knowledge he came to possess (â€" though nothing about what these secrets might have been). How it was Eragon who cast the spell that killed Galbatorix...

Finally: Of how Eragon and Saphira had left Alagaesia â€" To raise the dragons, and the Riders elsewhere... but never to return...

There the story stopped...

Hiccup's head was full of thoughts, comments, and questions â€" but he asked the most immediate question first, "But... where do you fit into all of this?"

An instant later, they heard a sound â€" getting louder, as it drew closer...

'THUD' â€" 'THUD' â€" 'THUD'...

Then a MASSIVE sapphire- blue dragon landed in the empty end of the clearing...

Suddenly, a series of thoughts shot through Hiccup's mind... '_Sapphire- blue... The egg... They left Alagaesia..._' â€"â€" Just like that, Hiccup knew who he was talking to...

"You're... You're..."

"Yes, Hiccup. I am Eragon â€" and this is Saphira."

There were several minutes of silence â€" while Hiccup worked to comprehend what he had just been told. Finally, he managed to say, "If humans are part of this pact... How could we not know? â€" My people have been fighting dragons for centuries..."

"It may be that only the 'groups' who were represented during the casting of the 'binding' spells became part of it... That seems to be the most likely possibility. â€" In any case, if your people are trying to 'cooperate' with your local dragons populations, such a bond could go a long way in accomplishing your goal..."

Hiccup felt a surge of energy run through him â€" could feel his spirits begin to lift... "Is it possible?! â€" Could you really...?"

"Magic is bound to what is most commonly known as 'the Ancient Language'. To use it, one must state their intent in this language, and be able to fuel the spell. For this, one would need to use the true- name of the language. As I am one of only three people who do this name: Yes, I can forge a new pact... If I find your people are worthy, and would make good riders."

Eragon paused for a moment, considering the two of them â€" Hiccup, and Toothless.

"The two of you would â€" I think, be worthy candidates... Saphira?"

Hiccup turned... and almost jumped out of his skin: He was looking directly into one of the blue dragon's eyes. â€" Saphira snorted once, and then turned away.

When Hiccup turned back to face Eragon, he saw that the latter was grinning. Then Eragon said, "If the two of you want, I could forge a bond between the two of you â€" and only the two of you." Eragon lifted a finger â€" for emphasis, "This is not a choice to be made rashly: If you take on this bond, you could live for hundreds â€" maybe thousands â€" of years. You would watch people you know now â€" age and die, while you â€" after a certain point, would remain largely untouched by time. â€"â€" Though from what I gleaned from Toothless and your minds... Astrid does have the potential to be an 'exception' to that rule..."

For the next half- hour, Hiccup thought about what he should do. Finally he said, "If you are willing, I would like to be a Rider in full â€" bonded to Toothless."

Eragon nodded â€" seeming to snap out of some kind of 'daze' â€" then he stood, and walked over to a mound of saddle- bags. A moment later, he returned with a large leather book â€" opening it, as he sat. Then he began to speak â€" and, while Hiccup could not understand the words, he could feel the power they contained...

Part way through the incantation, Eragon spoke a single Word â€" and it was as though a shudder passed through every molecule in Hiccup's body... and the world around them.

Hiccup knew immediately that it was the name of the Ancient Language â€" but... mere seconds after he'd heard it, it vanished from his mind.

When Eragon finished binding the spell in place, he turned to Hiccup, "Place one hand on Toothless â€" Like you did when you met him."

Hiccup did... and a charge of energy rushed through him. For a moment, Hiccup's vision flashed. When he could see again, he found himself staring at the silvery mark that had appeared on his palm...

Finally, Hiccup found his voice, "Thank you... What now? Do we go back to Berk?"

Eragon shook his head, "Now we will start your training. I am not assuming your position in Berk, so it is essential that your education be at least underway â€" when we return. Once there, I will train you â€" and perhaps I may start with a few others, if they show promise. â€"â€" But first things first: Shall we begin?"

To be continued...

2. Chapter 2

****Chapter Two****

****Part One: They're... Gone...****

Astrid's P.O.V

Today was the sixth day after Hiccup and Toothless had left the island of Berk, though the mood of the villagers hadn't improved much. â€" This was largely because there was no way for people to distract themselves: Everywhere you went â€" Every time you turned around, you saw some at least one dragon... Either near- by or from a distance.

Hiccup had brought the dragons into their lives. Hiccup had found a place for the dragons on Berk â€" he'd even found ways for all of them to benefit from their various skill sets. Then, when Hiccup had tried to explain what was causing the lightning, all but a few of them refused to listen... Choosing to blame Toothless â€" Hiccup's Night- Fury partner...

Now they were both gone, and no one knew when they would return â€" or, though none of them wanted to even think about it â€" IF they would return... â€" The world could be a dangerous place...

People went about their daily tasks, but with little enthusiasm. Days passed like this. â€" They'd known that they'd 'feel' the absence of Hiccup and Toothless, but none of them had expected that it would be like this...

Ever since Hiccup and Toothless had left, Astrid had felt... lost. It was as though some feature of the landscape â€" one she'd always counted on being there... had vanished: As though two mountains had

vanished â€" and you couldn't _not_ notice that they were gone...

Astrid had spent every minute she could with Stormfly â€" either flying, walking, or just... sitting with her Deadly Nadder. â€"â€" Whenever they flew, they kept their eyes peeled for the slightest sign of the black dragon returning. Also â€" instead of flying over the island of Berk, they'd fly within sight of the ocean: So they'd know when the Night Fury and his Rider returned...

On the sixth day, a few of the dragons began to get... restless. Astrid stepped- up. â€"â€" She enjoyed the work: It made her think of the days... before the 'lightning incident.'

The following day, however, the formerly- agitated dragons settled down again. In fact... all of the dragons seemed... calmer â€"â€" As though they knew something that the humans didn't...

****Part Two: A Rider- In- Training****

Hiccup had always been both intelligent and observant, as well as having an extremely good memory. These qualities proved themselves invaluable â€" as his training began.

Before they'd started, Eragon had informed both Hiccup and Toothless that â€" for as long as he and Saphira were training him, Hiccup and Toothless were to refer to Eragon and Saphira as 'Ebrithil' â€" which meant 'Master' â€" in the Ancient Language. As Eragon had said, "We are your teachers, and you our students."

During the first three days, Eragon instructed Hiccup in the proper use of Ancient Language â€" paying particular attention to grammar and pronunciation. â€"â€" When Hiccup finally asked why it was so important, Eragon explained the danger of making a mistake when casting a spell. The gist of Eragon's explanation was: 'The spell would do what it was told to. A mistake â€" however small â€" could weaken or kill the spell- caster, or cause an unintended effect on the person or thing that the spell was meant to affect.'

During the afternoon of the fourth day â€" and for the next two days, they started to do some work with magic... Though only a few spells, none of which required more than a small amount of energy. Eragon also explained that gemstones could be used to store energy for future use â€" but that it was 'a topic to be explored at a later time'.

On the morning of the seventh day, Eragon brought him to a smaller clearing â€" not far from the one where Hiccup and Toothless had met Eragon. In the middle of that clearing sat a broad stump, where Eragon told Hiccup to sit â€" and then explaining what he was to do: "Open your mind, and listen to the 'voices of the forest'. Remain here for two hours, or until you have heard all you can. Then return to the main clearing, and tell me what you've learned." (Hiccup wasn't sure how or what this was supposed to teach him, but he figured it was a 'this will make sense in due time' kind of deal.)

Eragon left, and Hiccup opened his mind. At first he'd found the experience unsettling, but after a few minutes it became... relaxing. He lost track of time as he shifted his focus from one feature in the

clearing to the next. He wanted to see how it all... connected â€" he knew it had to. On several occasions, he thought he'd reached a point of general awareness... but it always slipped away â€" a moment later.

After the two hours had passed, he returned to the main clearing. Once there, he explained what he'd experienced â€" and he'd tried to do â€" to Eragon.

When Hiccup had finished, Eragon considered him for a moment, then said, "You still have a ways to go, but you are on the right track. A general awareness it precisely want you should be trying to achieve." Eragon was quiet for a moment. "You're making progress â€" and far faster than I would have expected. â€" Perhaps it's just as well..."

At first, Hiccup was glad at the prospect of returning home... then the last part of Eragon's sentence registered... "Has something happened?" Remembering, he added, "Ebrithil?"

"A few of the dragons were beginning to get a little restless â€" but I was able to calm them from here. In any case, I believe we've made enough headway, for now. We will leave for Berk tomorrow morning, and continue from there."

Hiccup's mind was buzzing, but he managed to say, "Yes, Ebrithil." He turned, intending to go and prepare Toothless's saddle bags, but... "Ebrithil... How is it that you can send your thoughts out as far as Berk?"

"I can do a great many things, Hiccup â€" Many of which go far beyond what you would consider possible. You are making progress, but you have barely begun to learn what We are capable of. â€" Now... I suggest you get ready for tomorrow. It'll be a... interesting day"

**To be continued...**

3. Chapter 3

Chapter Three

Part One: Returning Home

The 'uninhabited' island...

The following morning, Eragon and Hiccup rose early. Having made their preparations the previous day, Hiccup had expected they would depart as soon as they'd eaten and saddled their dragons...

Instead, Eragon had told Hiccup and Toothless something that seemed impossible. Then he said, "During the past week, you have begun to learn about magic â€" and the Ancient Language. Yesterday, I told you that you've 'barely begun to learn what We are capable of: Consider this a demonstration. It would be unfitting â€" as the first Viking to also be a Rider and Dragon â€" to return home anything less than 'whole.'"

Even after it was done, Hiccup had difficulty believing it: Eragon

had used magic to re-grow Hiccup's foot â€" the foot Hiccup had lost during the Battle of the Red Death... Then Eragon had done the same thing to Toothless's tail...

Still trying to puzzle out how this could've been possible â€" Eragon had said that he'd 'explain it later in Hiccup's training'... which wasn't much help.

Then the two of them had mounted their dragons, and set off on the return- flight to Berk...

A few hours later...

They stopped on the same island where Hiccup and Toothless had â€" one week earlier, to eat and so that they could make what Eragon called "final preparations."

Only now did Eragon explain what that had meant, "If Saphira and I fly to Berk â€" with you or not, we'll cause a panic. So, I will cast a spell that will hide both Saphira and I from view â€" as well as prevent anyone from hearing the sounds we may make."

'**You can do that? '** Toothless's questioning thought sounded in their minds â€" sounding both amazed and curious. The Night Fury's voice was deep and strong, and was very steady â€" considering he hadn't been _able_ to talk the week before.

Eragon had only smiled, and spoken several phrases in the Ancient Language â€" then both Eragon and Saphira vanished from view...

Then they rose up from the island â€" ready to finish the last leg of their journey.

Back on Berk â€" Around mid- afternoon...

Astrid and Stormfly were in the air â€" gazing out in the direction that Hiccup and Toothless had flown off in. When Astrid first saw the dot in the distance, she thought she was imagining it â€" then the dot grew larger... and larger â€" finally, there was no mistaking it...

Immediately, they swung towards the village â€" having promised to bring back news if they saw that Hiccup and Toothless were returning.

By the time the Night Fury landed, the entire village had gathered â€" even Mildew was there, though he didn't look happy about it.

As soon as Hiccup had dismounted, Astrid tackled him in a hug, "Where have you two been?"

'**Give him a minute â€" We just got back! '** said a voice, which... seemed to be projecting itself directly into their heads.

"What was that?" Astrid asked â€" like the others, she looked shaken.

Hiccup sighed, "Well... so much for being subtle." Then he raised his voice for attention, and said, "That 'voice'... it was Toothless â€" He can talk, now."

'**Hi,'** said Toothless â€" helpfully, nodding to the assembled Vikings. '**Good to be back! â€" You people will not believe what happened to us while we were gone! '**

"Uh... Toothless â€" I think they're having a hard enough time trying to believe what's _happening_ â€" like, right now. The whole 'talking dragon' thing is 'a little' new to them."

'**Uh... Right â€" Maybe **_**you**_** should tell them what happened... '**

It took a while â€" almost as long as Eragon had taken to tell the story, even though Hiccup was only giving a general summary â€" as in 'the _bare facts_.' (He gave the briefest description of the events leading to the formation of the riders, and _slightly_ more of the details surrounding Eragon and Saphira's adventures.)

Hiccup explained about Eragon and Saphira â€" of their offer, and of what they'd already done for him and Toothless. He even showed them his newly- grown foot, and Toothless's new tail- fin.

Finally, he explained how Eragon had cast a spell to keep himself and Saphira from being seen or heard â€" and how they had accompanied them back to Berk...

Hiccup turned to the seemingly empty air behind him and Toothless, and said, "Ebrithil...â€" followed by several other words in an unknown language...

About twenty feet out from the edge of the cliff, the air rippled...

Then â€" as though emerging from a fogbank, Saphira's head appeared out of thin- air â€" followed by her long neck... then the main part of her body... and â€" finally, the tip of her tail.

And â€" on the dragon's back, sat a man: ... Eragon.

A moment later â€" as soon as Saphira was over land, Eragon leapt free of his saddle... falling toward the ground...

Mere seconds before he would have hit, he spoke a word â€" one the watchers below couldn't catch â€" and his fall slowed, and he landed lightly on his feet...

Eragon â€" Bromson, Shadeslayer, Kingkiller...

Eragon had arrived.

**To be continued...**

4. Chapter 4

Chapter Four

The Leader of The Riders

The moment Eragon's feet landed on the ground, a hush descended upon

the gathered Vikings...

Then a baby " who'd been asleep in his mother's arms " woke up, and began to cry. Without a word Eragon walked over, and spoke a single sentence in a language that none of them could understand. " " The effect was immediate: The baby stopped crying, and stared at Eragon as though he'd never seen anyone like him before (- which, of course, he hadn't). Then the baby smiled and laughed...

Despite her son's reaction, the mother still seemed uncertain, "What... What did you do?"

Eragon smiled reassuringly, "I told him to be calm, and that he was among friends. And yes, for those of you who are wondering " I was speaking in the Ancient Language... It can be used for far more than simply casting spells."

By now, Mildew had pushed his way through the crowd, "Bah " magic. First dragons, and now magic! " Next thing I know, you lot will be hunting 'fairies' or going to war with 'goblins'! This whole story is utterly..."

"Quiet " Mildew!" Stoick broke in. "Can't you go a single day without braying in my ear about everything that's wrong in your world?"

Mildew looked offended, "I've got every right to have my own opinion!"

Then Eragon addressed Mildew, "You have a right to your own opinion " not an obligation to share it." Mildew rounded on Eragon " who continued to speak. "I've heard about you, Mildew, and I know your type: You have grown bitter and self- absorbed, and you take personal offence whenever something doesn't go your way. You start quarrels wherever you see opportunity simply so you can claim to hold some 'moral high- ground', and attempt to hold others to blame for your own shortcomings. " " If you cannot overcome your bitterness that's your problem " but do not use it as an excuse to taint the daily lives of those around you." Eragon's voice was firm and polite, and his tone was casual.

Mildew's face had turned red, and it took several moments before he was able to find his voice. Once he had, he went off on a tangent " spewing abuse at Eragon. At first, Eragon's expression remained unchanged, but the watchers soon glimpsed the first flicker of anger in The Rider's eyes... After several minutes had passed, Mildew noticed that something didn't feel right, and he fell silent...

"You overstep your place " Mildew," Eragon's voice remained calm, but something about it had changed. "Many would kill you for speaking thus " and I can kill more easily than you would think possible " However... I learned a rather amusing spell from another spell- caster, a while back... Perhaps this will teach you some respect..." Then, once again, Eragon spoke in the Ancient Language...

A few seconds after Eragon had finished his spell, Mildew let out a raucous "HEE- HAW!" " He remained fully human, but " whenever he tried to speak, he brayed like a donkey!

The crowd of Vikings burst out laughing, and " when the laughter

died down (â€" as much as it was likely to â€"), Eragon addressed Mildew, "This spell will remain active until this time tomorrow. From then on, I suggest you guard your tongue better."

Mildew stormed through the crowd â€" waving his stick around, and shouting "HEE- HAW! HEE- HAW!"... Then he was gone.

Once he was able to breathe properly again, Stoick rasped out, "A donkey! â€" Fitting!" There was a general murmur of agreement, at that.

Hiccup had laughed with the others, but then he asked a question that was bothering him, "Ebrithil... You said that you could 'kill more easily than we'd think possible'... What did you mean by that?" â€"â€" That attracted everyone's attention, quickly enough.

"I know spells that would kill instantly â€" that give their target no chance to escape, and that require no more energy than lifting a finger â€" Spells that could obliterate an army." Eragon sighed, "No one should want to kill anyone, but when it becomes this easy... It's worse. This is why I always try to find alternatives to killing, and why â€" whenever I see someone who I can heal â€" I do so."

This was followed by several minutes of silence, than Hiccup managed to say, "And... And you're willing to show us how to do this?"

"I am willing to see if your people are worthy to join a pact like ours, and â€" if I decide that you are, to forge that pact between your people and the local dragons. Normally, the dragons would entrust a certain number of eggs to The Riders. Then certain spells would be placed on them, enabling them to hatch for and bond with their chosen Rider. â€"â€" I have already made an exception in the case of Hiccup and Toothless, and I believe a few others may also prove worthy of the same..."

For the briefest moment Eragon caught Astrid's gaze and held it. Astrid didn't know how, but she had 'a feeling' that she was one of the few... ('Maybe Hiccup put in a good word for me,' Astrid thought â€" she felt herself blush, 'slightly', at the thought.)

"... Aside from that, Riders would be chosen and trained as the dragons choose them. â€"â€" For now: Saphira and I will continue to train our current students, and see for ourselves if your people are, in fact, worthy. In either case: The secrets of The Riders will remain the secrets of The Riders: They are simply too dangerous to become common knowledge â€" as Galbatorix has proven."

"_Galbatorix..."_ It was the name of the Traitor King â€" in the story that Hiccup had told them... "So... He really existed?" Someone asked â€" from the crowd.

"He did." Eragon confirmed, "Until I killed him."

There was another pause, then Hiccup spoke- up again, "I meant to ask this before, but... How did you kill Galbatorix? And when did it happen? â€" You never said..."

Eragon was silent for several minutes before answering, "If you recall, Galbatorix ruled for close to a century â€" killing,

enslaving, and tormenting â€" the entire time..." People nodded: Of course they knew! "I cast a spell that forced Galbatorix to experience the pain and sorrow of all the people who he had harmed, as though it were his own... He was already mad, but it broke him. He stood in his throne room, and said two words in the Ancient Language: 'Be not' â€" and with that, Galbatorix literally wished himself out of existence. As for when: I killed Galbatorix when I was seventeen years old â€" and that was two- thousand years ago..."

**To be continued...**

5. Chapter 5

Chapter Five

Part One â€" In the Great Hall... {_Several hours later..._}

After the... 'Confrontation' between Eragon and Mildew, the remaining Vikings â€" accompanied by Eragon and Saphira, made their way to the Great Hall of Berk.

There, Eragon proceeded to fill in some of the gaps in the tale â€" as he'd told it to Hiccup. For much of that afternoon, he described battles he'd fought in â€" and creatures he'd encountered. Of how, initially, he'd been desperately outmatched in most of these encounters... Until, at last, he'd gone to Ellesmera â€" the Elvin capital. He explained how â€" having become as attuned to the natural world, he no longer partook of meat (- though he was careful to emphasize that he had no enmity towards those who did). â€"â€" He even described what he called the 'Agaiti Blodren' â€" or 'Blood-Oath Celebration', during which 'some mysterious force' changed him: Enhancing his reflexes far beyond those of a human, and altering his appearance...

Eragon paused then, as though expecting a question â€" though it was still almost a minute before one of his listeners finally said, "Not to be rude, but... You don't look that different from other humans..." The speaker let his sentence drift off â€" clearly not wanting to offend Eragon.

Eragon didn't look offended, however, "That is because â€" since before Hiccup arrived on the island where Saphira and I were waiting, I have been maintaining a spell â€" an illusion, to conceal my true appearance. I have found it a prudent measure in the past, as most people have a tendency to be... 'Uncertain' when they encounter the unfamiliar." Eragon paused for a moment â€" considering his audience, "However... I think now is as good a time as any..." â€"â€" Switching to the Ancient Language, he spoke several words. Then Eragon's face... 'Changed' â€" Becoming more elegant and refined â€" streamlined: Eragon's ears now tapered to noticeable points and his eyes finally seemed to 'fit' his face...

A ripple of shock passed through the hall, though it didn't last long. It seemed natural, somehow â€" Like they should have expected something like this...

Gobber spoke next, "And these 'enhanced reflexes' you mentioned... You mind giving us a demonstration? â€" We're quite good with

swordplay, and I must admit: I'm curious how we'd measure- up. We've got spare blades, if..."

Eragon was nodding, "I have no objection to giving a demonstration" and I do have a sword of my own." From beneath his blue cloak, he produced a hand- and- a- half long sword" the blade and hilt of which gleamed an iridescent blue... "I helped forge this blade myself, two millennia ago, with the assistance of the Elvin smith, Rhunon" and it has served me well, ever since."

The moment Eragon produced the sword; a hush fell through the hall" as every eye was drawn to the weapon... It seemed to emit an aura of deadly purpose." As though the sword _knew_ why it had been made, and delighted in fulfilling its duty...

"Do we have any volunteer challengers?" Eragon asked" of the hall at large. "You need not fear injury: I will fight to disarm, and my wards will prevent any of you from harming me" Nor do I object to facing multiple opponents at once."

"I'll take a swing at you!" Gobber called" already moving, as he spoke. He charged" swinging his sword as he came... "Less than five seconds later however, Gobber's sword was clattering to the floor, and Eragon had calmly set the point of his sword a few inches away from Gobber's throat...

In a low voice" that still carried through the silent hall, Eragon said, "Dead." The color drained out of Gobber's face, as Eragon pulled back. "Do we have any other volunteers?"

For several minutes a sea of whispers filled the hall, then two men leapt to their feet, and came at Eragon. This time, Eragon drew- out the fight" though there was no question as to who was in control. In fact, after five minutes, the two men were so out of breath, they were barely able to make it back to their seats.

Then a group of three surged to their feet" Then a group of five. They all seemed to be trying to wear Eragon down, but it wasn't until the fourth group that they glimpsed so much as a trickle of sweat... By the end of a half- hour, close to a third of the Viking men in the hall sat" panting" at their tables: There were no more challengers.

Only then did Eragon speak, "Strength you have, in plenty. However, you do not pause to evaluate my patterns of combat. Numbers and strength are important, but they alone cannot ensure victory in battle." With that, he turned around, and calmly returned to his seat.

As Eragon sat, Gobber" who'd finally recovered from his own very-brief clash, asked, "Is there any chance of you sharing some tips on swordplay while you're here?" That was some... very impressive fighting."

Eragon shrugged, "I plan to instruct Hiccup in any case. If a few others wish to join in on _those lessons_, I see no reason to refuse them." Tomorrow, however, I will begin by meeting the people of this village. And" of course, continuing to instruct my new students."

Eragon excused himself from the hall, not long afterwards â€" though it was some time before others began to do the same...

****Part Two â€" Astrid and Stormfly****

The following morning â€" Eragon began to meet with various villagers...

Having eaten breakfast in the Great Hall, Astrid and Stormfly had made their way to the cliff overlooking the ocean â€" intending to go flying: It was a great day for it...

They were somewhat surprised to see Eragon and Saphira waiting for them, however. Eragon noticed their surprise, and raised an eyebrow, "I did say that I intended to meet the people living on Berk, did I not? â€" It seems only natural to start with those who we believe show the most promise."

Astrid â€" still stunned, managed to say, "Did Hiccup...?"

"'Put in a good word' for you?" Eragon shrugged. "He told me his story, which did show you in a positive light: Starting with the integration of dragons to Berk, and continuing to the present. While you have made a good impression thus far, I intend to draw my own conclusions â€" as to whether or not _the two of you_ should be permitted to take a more 'active' roll in these events."

Astrid felt a thrill of anticipation run through her.

She wasn't sure how long they talked, but she answered every question put to her honestly, and completely. (Eragon didn't ask about her feelings toward Hiccup, though she was pretty sure that he was learning more from her than simply what she was _telling_ him...)

Finally, Eragon nodded, and turned to look at Saphira. For several minutes, the Rider and Dragon seemed to be communicating silently with each other, then Eragon nodded, "We believe that the two of you are worthy â€" however..." Eragon raised a finger, "You need to consider whether this is what _you_ want. Living for centuries â€" or millennia, as I have â€" is not always easy: If you enter this pact, you could very well see the youngest child in this village today die of old- age, and his children â€" and so on. It is not something to take on without due consideration. â€" Hiccup himself pondered this for nearly a half- hour, before he decided to accept my offer."

Astrid understood what Eragon meant, but she already knew what her decision would be. She looked Eragon in the eye, and said, "This is what I want... If the two of us â€" Astrid paused, gesturing at Stormfly, "Would've been the only ones, I don't know if I'd be as sure... But we're not the only ones, and I am sure."

Eragon examined her intently for a moment â€" then, finally, he nodded, "Very well." Then â€" as, Astrid knew, he had for Hiccup, Eragon produced a leather-bound book, and began to read... A few minutes later, Eragon spoke the name of the Ancient Language â€" then said, "Place one hand on Stormfly."

Astrid did, and a charge of energy shot through her. A moment later,

she was staring at her hand â€" which now bore a mark identical to the one on one of both Hiccup's and Eragon's hands.

Eragon nodded, solemnly, "It is done."

****Part Three â€" The Visits Continue****

Astrid had expected that Eragon would ask her to send someone else to meet with Eragon and Saphira, and was surprised when the two of them returned to the village with her and Stormfly.

For the rest of the morning, Eragon went from house to house. He didn't bind anyone else to their dragons â€" stating that 'he only intended to do so in special cases'.

Astrid went with them, as they went from house to house â€" as families came out to meet them (- as Saphira couldn't fit in, it seemed rude to do otherwise).

So Astrid was there when Eragon met Hildegard (- the... rather ugly baby-girl that Gobber had tried to name 'Magnus'). When Eragon saw the girl, Astrid saw his expression change to what she thought was a combination of disbelief and dismay â€" and he murmured a word (â€" to Astrid, it sounded like 'Barzeln'... though she had no idea what it meant, and it had no visible effect, and nobody else seemed to have noticed).

Finally, Eragon announced that these visits would resume the following morning: It was time for Eragon and Saphira to continue Hiccup and Toothless's training, and to begin Astrid and Stormfly's.

****_To be continued..._****

6. Chapter 6

****The Training of Riders****

****Part One â€" How it Began...****

Once Eragon and Astrid had won free of the crowd, and mounted their respective dragons, the four of them took to the air. Eragon and Saphira took the lead â€" angling toward an uninhabited part of the island. Astrid and Stormfly made to follow â€" aware of both their own and each other's curiosity...

It was Stormfly who broke the silence and â€" 'speaking' so they could all hear, asked, ****'Where are we going?'**

A moment later, Saphira began to angle downwards â€" toward one end of a large clearing: Large enough even for her to land or take-off from. Then Eragon's voice reached their ears... "We will be instructing the four of you from here â€" where we have both the space and privacy that will be needed."

It was only then that Astrid saw Hiccup and Toothless standing below â€" waiting for them.

A few minutes later, in the clearing...

The two newly- bonded dragon- riders and their dragons stood before Eragon and Saphira " waiting to hear how the lesson will begin...

Finally, Saphira spoke " and the words seemed to echo in their minds... *_ 'Today, the two of you " Toothless and Stormfly " will come with me.' *_ Toothless and Stormfly did not question their instructions: They opened their wings, and took to the air " following Saphira, towards one of Berk's highest mountain peaks...

When the dragons had finally vanished from view, Eragon turned to Hiccup, "I want you to return to the clearing, and pick-up where you left-off with your meditations."

Hiccup inclined his head, and said; "Ebrithiln" " then he turned, and left the main clearing. Before he vanished from view Hiccup paused, then " projecting his words into Astrid's mind, said, '_Don't worry: He's going to show you some of the things he showed me " before we made our return trip to Berk_.' Hiccup made no attempt to 'read' Astrid's thoughts, but he got the feeling that she was a little disappointed " so he added, '_We'll talk later..._' By the time Astrid had turned, he was gone...

For the next hour, Eragon instructed Astrid in the basic uses, grammar, and structure of the Ancient Language " and of magic. He explained the dangers of making mistakes when using magic, and explained how gemstones could be used to 'store' energy for later use " though, as he'd told Hiccup " it was a topic to be explored later in their training...

In what seemed like half that time " to Astrid, they heard the sounds of Hiccup returning. When he finally re-entered the clearing, Astrid thought he looked ... 'Disappointed'. For the next half- hour, Hiccup informed Eragon of his progress " conveying information that Astrid couldn't imagine how he'd acquired it. Finally, Hiccup concluded by saying, "There were a few times where I thought I'd found that 'point of general- awareness'... but it kept slipping away."

"It will come in good time. You have already made considerable progress " and in little over a week. Remember: 'Anything that is worth achieving is worth taking the time to learn.' Now..." Eragon turned to face Astrid, "Hiccup and I are going to do some work with magic. For now, I want you to simply watch and listen " and make note of any pointers I give Hiccup." Astrid nodded " to show that she understood, and she settled down on a boulder to watch... For the next hour, Hiccup used magic to lift a pebble into the air " and keep it hovering at a set height. Then it was a sphere of water that was set to hover. Then Hiccup froze the water, and then heated it (" the latter of which seemed particularly draining for Hiccup). Then the exercises continued...

Then it was Astrid's turn. First, Eragon told her to lift a pebble off the ground, using the words 'Stenr reisa'. She did as she was told, but... apparently she'd put a little _too much_ into her spell: The pebble shot into the air as though it had been launched from a catapult " Landing a few seconds later, almost ten paces from where she stood...

There was a moment of silence. Astrid glanced first at Hiccup " whose eyebrows were as high up as they could go, then at Eragon " who looked... She couldn't tell what he thought. She could feel herself blushing, but managed to say, "Uh... Sorry?"

"You told the stone to rise, and it did." Eragon commented. "However, you channelled more energy into the spell than it needed " as I'm sure you've noticed. You must learn to judge how much energy a spell will cost you. Remember: You only have so much energy available to you at any given time - If ou cast a spell that exceeds that, it can kill you." Astrid nodded, though she kept her eyes downcast. "It's an easy mistake to make " and one even the most experienced of spell-casters remain prone to..."

Eragon's sentence drifted off " as he seemed to withdraw into himself, then he said, "Saphira and your dragons are on their way back..." Eragon told them, before another thought occurred to him, "Something else I should tell you: The two of you will be expected to learn the same lessons as your dragons " and they yours. At the end of future lessons, each of you will be asked questions about what the other has learned: You will answer by sharing the memories of your lesson with your partner. " Am I understood?"

Hiccup and Astrid responded in unison, "Yes, Ebrithiln."

"Then we will resume our lessons tomorrow afternoon."

There was a brief pause, than Hiccup asked, "Why not in the morning... " Ebrithiln?"

"Tomorrow, we will begin to work with swords..." They saw a gleam in Eragon's eyes, as he added, "I noticed some interest in the subject, when it was... 'brought- up' in the Great Hall, the other day."

****Part Two " Swordplay****

The following morning, the Great Hall was buzzing with excitement: Eragon had announced that he would be allowing four others " in addition to Hiccup and Astrid " to join in the lesson, and anyone who wished to would be allowed to watch...

Two hours before noon...

Eragon stood in the center of the Dragon Arena of Berk, and in front of him stood Hiccup and Astrid " who were joined by: Snotlout, Ruff & Tuff, and Gobber (- who looked a little uncomfortable standing with the students, but did a reasonably good job of hiding it).

Snotlout also looked on- edge: Eragon had overheard him commenting that 'the only reason (Eragon) had defeated so many Vikings in the Great Hall were his enhanced reflexes'...

Snotlout had been talking " loudly " in the Great Hall: "... If his reflexes hadn't been boosted, there's no way that Eragon could've done it " Nobody's that good!"... Then he'd noticed the people around him gesturing for him to stop... "He's standing right behind me " Isn't he?" ... _Now Snotlout felt sure he was about to pay for what he'd said...

Once the watchers had quietened, Eragon spoke, "I'm sure many of you have heard about the 'comments' that a 'certain individual' made, earlier today â€" in the Great Hall..." â€" Snotlout's face turned as white as snow, and several people in the crowd laughed... â€" "I have decided to give him an opportunity to test his theory: He will face one of my students... Hiccup, if you would..."

The silence deepened, as the two young Vikings stepped forward, and the others backed- up to give them room. Before Hiccup could draw the sword that had been found for him, Eragon approached and murmured instructions to him â€" in a voice too low for anyone else to hear... An instant later, Hiccup grinned widely â€" and nodded his understanding...

As soon as Eragon said the word, Snotlout leapt forward â€" swinging his sword in a downward slash... But Hiccup had already darted aside â€" as though he'd somehow known the blow was coming...

Everyone saw the expression on Hiccup's face â€" and it wasn't one they'd seen before: Open... Calm... Unaffected by the series of cuts and slashes Snotlout kept launching â€" none of which came close to hitting their mark... Finally, Hiccup struck â€" the motion smooth, and while Snotlout was able to parry, it was a clumsy motion... Then Hiccup spun around, and Snotlout prepared to deliver a blow that would've opened Hiccup from behind â€" if Snotlout had had the opportunity to deliver it... But â€" quick as a viper, Hiccup finished his rotation and jabbed his sword directly towards Snotlout's exposed chest... â€" Again, Snotlout blocked, but it was another clumsy motion... and it cost him his opportunity...

Eragon called a halt, then â€" and the two young- Vikings returned to the center of the arena. Then Eragon turned to Hiccup, "Your reflexes were good, but your timing was off. Don't try to move quickly _or_ slowly â€" Remember: Observe your opponent's rhythms â€" Follow them when they suit you, and disrupt them if they don't. Pick your strategy, search for the opening you need, and â€" when it presents itself â€" you strike. Now: Try again."

This advice didn't mean anything to those watching, but Hiccup seemed to understand. Then â€" when Eragon gave the word, the fight resumed...

This time, Hiccup attacked first â€" and this seemed to throw Snotlout off- guard. Hiccup continued to rain down blows â€" keeping Snotlout on the defensive, which Snotlout clearly wasn't happy about... Then â€" suddenly, Hiccup's blows slowed... As though he'd suddenly grown tired... Snotlout began to take the offensive â€" and, while Hiccup never took a wound, he continued to retreat...

But those watching could tell that something wasn't right... Hiccup's expression was just as calm as it had been before â€" Then part of Eragon's advice began to make sense... '_Pick your strategy, search for the opening you need_...' It was a set- up...

Then it happened: Hiccup ducked one of Snotlout's cuts, and 'dove' to the right... Snotlout turned, and looked directly at a metal- shield that was hanging on the arena wall â€" and that reflected the light of the sun directly into Snotlout's eyes...

During the scant seconds that Snotlout was blinded â€" vulnerable, Hiccup sent Snotlout's sword clattering out of his hand with a well-placed blow, then set the point lightly on Snotlout's throat...

For almost a minute, nobody moved, or spoke, or seemed to breathe... Snotlout â€" having recovered â€" was frozen in disbelief...

Eragon spoke first, "Yes â€" Exactly! ... Well played, Hiccup."

A moment later, the crowd recovered from their surprise, and roared in approval...

Hiccup â€" who looked a little surprised, himself, lifted the point of his sword away from Snotlout's throat, and sheathed it.

Eventually the watchers calmed- down, and â€" beckoning the others forward, Eragon began to show them the '_basic principal_' of what he'd taught Hiccup...

Astrid couldn't believe what she'd just seen; and resolved to ask about it when the four of them met for that afternoon's lesson... She wasn't sure, but she had a feeling that it had something to do with... whatever Hiccup had done when he'd left the main clearing...

****Part Three â€" The 'Thoughts of the Forest'****

After they'd eaten with the other villagers, Hiccup, Astrid, and their dragons set- out for the field where Eragon and Saphira would be waiting for them â€" to begin their afternoon lessons... As they flew, they talked â€" about the sword- fighting lesson, and of the humorous event that had occurred as they and the other Vikings were making their way back to the Great Hall...

_ Each of them had been sitting on their respective dragons, which were walking next to Saphira. Eragon was just ahead of them â€" on foot, talking to Stoick and Gobber... _

Both Stoick and Gobber wanted to know if Eragon intended to 'forge' the Riders' bond between any of the other young- Vikings who'd been among the 'original Riders of Berk'...

Eragon had said that he planned to meet with them individually â€" the following morning. "I believe Fishlegs and Meatlug have potential. Snotlout â€" Snotlout... I'm less sure of. He has potential â€" but he is prideful, and likely to think of this as his 'right', rather than an opportunity. Besides, he and Hookfang have yet to reach the same 'level of understanding.'"

****_He has the vanity of one of the elder, wild- dragons - without any reason to_ be,****'** ****Saphira chimed in - her amusement evident, in her voice.**

****_You should hear some of the things Hookfang says about his_ rider!, '**** Stormfly chimed in.

Toothless laughed, at that: Clearly the dragons had been sharing Hookfang's stories amongst themselves - even as the humans would have...

"As for the twins..." Eragon shrugged, "Honestly, I'm not entirely sure I'd have trusted those two with sharp- objects â€" much less a dragon... Yet, you've done both â€" and your village is still standing. â€" It's something I'll have to think about for a little while yet."

With that, Eragon leapt â€" backwards, into the air â€" and clambered up Saphira's side and into her saddle. The dragon started to rise into the air â€" buffeting those below with gusts of wind, every time it flapped. Just before Saphira rose out of hearing distance, Eragon called down to their students, "Meet us at the clearing, after you've eaten â€" We'll pick- up where we left off yesterday." â€"â€" Then they were gone..._

Even as Saphira rose out of sight, Hiccup, Astrid, and their dragons saw the expressions on Stoick's and Gobber's faces - and they were priceless..._

Astrid had even asked Hiccup about the 'mystery- task' Eragon had assigned him, in their previous lesson... Hiccup had described a meditation- exercise â€" something that Eragon had called 'listening to the voices of the forest'. Before long, Hiccup had noticed her expression â€" total confusion, and added, "It might be better for Eragon to explain..."

So, once they'd landed, and the dragons had taken- off, Astrid redirected her question to Eragon...

The next thing Astrid knew, she was sitting on the stump in a smaller clearing â€" and Eragon was saying, "For this exercise, you need to open your mind, and listen â€" just as Hiccup told you. Listen to the thoughts of the animals â€" large, and small. You may recall, in our last lesson that Hiccup referred to almost reaching a 'point of general- awareness'? That is, ultimately, the desired outcome, and â€" though takes time and patience to achieve â€" it has many uses."

Before Eragon left, Astrid asked, "Is that how Hiccup won, this morning? â€" Ebrithil?"

"Essentially â€" Yes. This exercise helps to condition your mind to observe details that would otherwise elude you. By doing so, you can react to events as they occur â€" even glean what may happen before the action is fully underway: This is how Hiccup was able to evade all of Snotlout's blows, in this morning's lesson. â€" See what you can accomplish in the next two hours, then return to the main clearing."

Once Eragon had left, Astrid cautiously opened her mind: An idea that had scared her, at first â€" and still did, if truth be told. (The knowledge that anyone with the ability could 'see' what she was thinking scared her...).

Despite her uncertainty, she opened her mind. For a moment, she was overwhelmed by the amount of information that came pouring into her mind â€" than she relaxed: '_Ok... Get a hold of yourself, Astrid. â€" Just... take things one step at a time._' She decided to start with something small... the insects. (Some girls â€" she knew, were afraid of insects... Which made no sense to her: 'Why _should anyone

be scared of something you could crush with one finger_?' " With some effort, Astrid cleared her mind, and got to work...

When her two hours were up, Astrid returned to the larger clearing. Excitedly, she told Eragon and Hiccup what she'd learned. When she finished, Eragon shifted and said, "For a first try, that was reasonably good. However, your focus was too narrow: You must work to be aware of all things equally " rather than focusing on a single topic or group."

Feeling somewhat disheartened, Astrid said, "There's so much out there, though... How am I supposed to take it all in?"

Eragon considered her for a moment, and then smiled, "Perhaps you've made more progress than was apparent..." Astrid felt energized by the words " then Eragon continued, "Your focus was too narrow, but you were aware that there was more to see " however briefly. Remember, though: You do not need to memorize what you sense, or even to understand all of it. " All you need to do is develop your awareness of the life around you: During your meditations, you can 'allow' exist " not as an individual, but as part of a greater whole."

Then the three of them picked- up where they'd left off with the subject of magic " reviewing the exercises from the previous day. This time, when she tried to lift the pebble, Astrid put only the amount of energy that it would have taken for her to pick it up herself: The stone rose up " slowly, until it hovered at shoulder-height... It hovered there for perhaps ten seconds, then it fell back to the ground. " " By the time the lesson was over, Astrid was justifiably pleased with herself.

Nodding, Eragon said, "We will continue from here, tomorrow." (Even as he spoke, Astrid noticed that she was faintly aware of Stormfly's approach... The presence of the other dragons' minds was fainter, but she could sense the presence of her dragon, as it drew nearer!)

To be continued...

7. Chapter 7

Chapter Seven

New Student(s)

Part One " Fishlegs and Meatlug

Eragon and Saphira had asked Fishlegs and Meatlug to meet them at the same stretch of cliff-side as they had Astrid and Stormfly " when the two of them were bonded, becoming Dragon and Rider...

Now, the old Rider and his massive blue- dragon watched as the 'husky' Viking and his Gronkle made their way towards them. Both Viking and dragon were visibly nervous, but they came " nonetheless.

As they talked, both Fishlegs and Meatlug relaxed " and even grew excited, as Eragon explained what being a Rider involved. (Fishlegs

was particularly interested in the idea of gleaning a deeper understanding of nature " and other, related topics.) As they talked, Eragon slipped in leading questions " the answers of which allowed him to puzzle- out Fishlegs' nature, and determine what kind of Rider he would be...

At a certain point in the conversation, Saphira " 'speaking' so only Eragon could hear, commented that, **'****_He is stronger than he looks, and has a keen mind. " Moreover, his temperament is not that of one who would allow an injustice to go 'unacknowledged'. If we give him the skill and abilities he now lacks, he could do much good for those around him._****'** Eragon agreed with her " on all points.

It wasn't much longer before both Eragon and Saphira were satisfied, and they extended their offer to forge the Bond between rider and dragon, Fishlegs accepted eagerly...

Not long after that, it was done...

****Part Two " Snotlout and Hookfang****

When it was his turn, Snotlout swaggered forward as though he was fully expected to become a Dragon Rider " in full: As though he thought the 'interview' was a formality, in his case (" just as Eragon had predicted).

Clearly convinced of his own self- worth, Snotlout kept trying to get Eragon to skip to the bonding- spells. ("I mean, come on: Obviously I'm Dragon- Rider material!", for example.)

Finally, Eragon said, "Snotlout: We do not believe the two of you are at the level you need to be. More importantly: You clearly believe that you have a '_right_' to be bonded to a dragon " That is not the case. You need to prove that you are worthy. You have potential, but you are not ready " At least, not yet."

****Part Three " Ruff / Tuff and Barf / Belch****

This 'interview' was over before it truly started: The twins got in an argument over each others' answers, and " following their lead, the two heads of their dragon started to fight each other, as well...

The combatants were so focused on their argument, that none of them noticed Eragon leaping into Saphira's saddle, or the sapphire- blue dragon diving from the cliff, and rising into the sky.

As they rose into the air, Eragon thought, '_Those ones would make appalling Dragon Riders, wouldn't they?_'

'**_Agreed,_'** Saphira snorted. **_'It seems to me that the only reason the four of them haven't destroyed " or been run- out of Berk, is that they're too busy trying to destroy each other.' _**Eragon smiled, as the two of them flew " enjoying each others' company...

****_To be continued..._****

8. Chapter 8

****Chapter Eight****

****Riders and Shadows****

****Part One " The First Riders of Berk****

Once Hiccup, Astrid, Fishlegs, and their dragons had wolfed down their lunches, they took to the air. Toothless, Stormfly and their Riders lead the way " and Meatlug followed close behind, with Fishlegs on her back.

As usual, Saphira and their own dragons departed " only a few minutes after they'd landed in the main clearing. " And, as usual, it was only after they'd left that their own lesson began...

"Today, we will deviate from what would be our 'usual' routine. The two of you..." Eragon paused " nodding to Hiccup and Astrid, "... will already know some of what will be discussed today, though I will be going into greater detail " now that all three of you are here."

The topic he started with was new to all of them, however: He told them about an ancient race, known only as 'the Gray Folk' " A race that had been old when even the _elves_ were young...

"... At that time, magic was wild: Anyone who could sense magic with their mind " and had the strength and will to use it, could do so. However, with no way to structure their thoughts, magicians couldn't control their talent." Eragon paused for a moment " to let this sink- in, than continued, "Finally, there was an accident " One that nearly destroyed every living being in the world. Afterwards, the Gray Folk gathered their strength, and cast an enchantment: They changed the nature of magic, binding it to their language " the Ancient Language " to control how much energy was released, and what it did." Almost as an afterthought, he added, "It is still _possible_ to use magic without the Ancient Language, though it is a risk to be taken only when absolutely necessary."

There was a moment of silence, than Astrid spoke- up, "But... Why would it be any more dangerous to cast a spell without the Ancient Language than with it?" " She didn't get it... The _spell_ itself couldn't change " simply because of the language it used... Could it?

Eragon thought for a moment, "I'll give you an example... Suppose I asked Hiccup to set fire to that tree" " he paused to point to a tree that grew near- by, "... he would say 'Burn that tree'. Then, if he glanced at, or thought about, one of you " for example, the magic would still burn the tree, not you. " " However, if he tried to cast the spell without the Ancient Language, the spell would switch to the new target. So " for obvious reasons, none of you are to even _attempt_ such a thing until I say you're ready."

After what Eragon had just told them, they had no difficulty making that promise " each of them thinking the same thing, as they did: '_This is the easiest promise I'll ever have to make.' _

They talked for a little while longer, than Eragon sent Hiccup and

Astrid off to _two_ smaller clearings â€" that branched off of the main one. (Both Hiccup and Astrid were a surprised to hear about the second clearing â€" and, though she didn't say so, Astrid was grateful for the privacy: There were thoughts and feelings she just ... wasn't ready to share with anyone, yet â€" even/ especially Hiccup...)

Meanwhile, Eragon would begin to bring Fishlegs up- to- date on the material that he'd already covered with Hiccup and Astrid...

Before they knew it, the afternoon was coming to an end â€" and their dragons were coming in for a landing. In fact, it was only then that they became aware of how hungry they were...

So the four Dragon Riders mounted their dragons, and rose into the sky â€" bound for the Great Hall, and a hot supper...

****Part Two â€" Shadows from the Past...****

As had become their routine, Eragon and Sahpira returned to Berk with their students â€" to eat supper in the Great Hall, with the rest of the villagers. This evening â€" even before entering the hall, they could tell that something was wrong...

The first thing they saw was the small crowd that had gathered around two Viking- children â€" a brother and sister, whose faces were white with fear...

Immediately, Eragon strode forwards, "What happened?" â€" At the sound of his voice, the crowd parted to let him through, and some of the tension in the room began to fade...

It was the mother of the two children who answered, "We don't know... We found them like this near the outskirts of the village, white-faced and panting â€" As though something had been chasing them... Their dragon â€" they share a Zippleback, showed up soon after. It was hurt â€" pretty badly... Gothi and Gobber are tending to him, now..."

"M-M-Monsters..." The boy stammered, "Th-They ch-chas-chased us... They walked funny, but they were fast â€" We wouldn't have got away if... if..." His sentence drifted off, but the listeners understood: Their dragon had protected them... Attacking these 'monsters', so the children could escape â€" And it had been injured in the process, which meant that it _had_ been fighting with _something_...

The mother â€" standing next to her children, one arm around each, picked up the tale, "They both gave the same description: 'Hooded and cloaked, fast- moving â€" despite the way they moved... They also seem able to immobilize â€" We've ever heard of a creature like this, before..."

Eragon sighed, "I have â€" In fact, I thought I had eradicated the last of their kind centuries ago: They are called the Ra- Zac."

A chill seemed to pass through the hall... Suddenly, one of the children â€" glimpsed the now wide- open doors of the Great Hall, and shrieked, "_IT'S HERE!_"

People spun around, and â€" sure enough, they saw a hooded and

cloaked figure... framed in the doorway. It chuckled, and said, "'_Eradicated'? â€" Oh, hardly... We have thrived â€" These past few centuries! So many 'dragon- hunting' expeditions! â€" We cannot claim credit for __all__ your losses, but we have eaten well!"_ The Ra- Zac turned its hidden face towards Eragon, "_And do not think we have forgotten you... Rider... 'The Bane of the Ra- Zac, they called you â€" once... Well, now __we__ shall be your __nightmare__ â€" until you are dead, and your bones cracked and broken... Until you â€"_"

... No one saw Eragon start to move, or draw his sword â€" and the Ra- Zac had been too preoccupied by the effect he knew he was having on the other occupants of the Great Hall...

But before the Ra- Zac could finish his sentence, a blue- blade was thrust through its chest â€" protruding from its back, a second later... â€" Than Eragon yanked his sword out of the creature...

The creature fell forward, slowly â€" its last word emerging with its last breath, "_... Die."_

... A second later, the Ra- Zac landed with a thud... Unmoving â€" dead...

Eragon stood over it, looking down. Finally, he said, "I was wrong to think your kind extinct â€" I'll admit that... but I will not make that mistake again: This time, The Riders will finish what I started â€" all those years ago â€" That, I promise..."

To be continued...

9. Chapter 9

Chapter Nine

Part One â€" Know Thy Enemy...

It took several minutes for the Vikings gathered in the Great Hall to process what had just happened. The three newly- bonded Riders were the first to recover, and immediately reached out to their dragons with their minds...

Once they made contact, the dragons sent a series of horrifying images flowing across their link: _Saphira was fighting a monstrous, winged creature â€" black, terrible, and no match for the blue- dragon... Mere minutes after the fight had begun; Saphira's opponent was bleeding copiously from dozens of gashes â€" while Saphira remained unharmed. â€"â€" A few minutes later, the enemy beast turned to flee, and Saphira moved in to finish it off..._

As quickly as they came, the stream of images faded â€" and the young Dragon Riders found themselves back in the Great Hall...

By now, the rest of the Vikings in the Great Hall had recovered from their shock, and, realizing that Eragon had encountered these creatures before, began shouting over each other â€" asking questions... And then â€" remembering that Eragon was not about to start talking until they'd stopped, silence fell...

"I know that this has been a... 'Unnerving' encounter, but â€" unfortunately, nothing I will be able to tell you will ease your concerns." He paused for a moment â€" looking more tired than they'd ever seen him... "Nonetheless, you do need to know what we're up against..."

"As I have already said, that was a Ra- Zac. As you would already know, they are unnaturally fast, and their breath can induce a stupor in those they are hunting... â€" I wish that was the worst of it, but I have barely scratched the surface..." Eragon's sentence drifted off, and he seemed to be lost in thought...

Stoick spoke- up, then, "Where did they come from, though? â€" What do they want?"

Eragon smiled, grimly â€" at the questions, "As to where they came from, I cannot say... I first encountered their kind when Galbatorix sent the ones he'd enslaved after Saphira and I â€" with orders to bring us to him, so he could force us to swear fealty in the Ancient Language. â€"â€" The Ra- Zac were his 'hunters': It is impossible to sense their presence â€" not even with magic... I would not have known that one was here â€" had he not decided to reveal himself. â€"â€" As for what they want..." Eragon hesitated â€" appearing to search for the right words...

A feeling of dread rose in Hiccup, "This... This 'Ra- Zac' said that they've 'thrived these past centuries'... and that they've 'eaten well' â€"â€" He didn't mean... They aren't..."

Eragon nodded, "I'm afraid so: Just as your dragons hunt fish, the Ra- Zac have developed the exact skills necessary to hunt humans â€" and they do so with deadly efficiency." He paused for a moment â€" then continued, "In all areas that humans are weak, the Ra- Zac are strong: They have excellent night- vision â€" can, in fact, see as well at night as you can in daylight. However; bright- light pains them â€" which is why they remain cloaked and hooded when they venture out in daylight. Once, they also feared deep water â€" as they cannot swim; though it would seem that they've found a way to overcome that particular fear..."

As Eragon fell silent, the hall began to fill with frightened mutterings... than Eragon continued to speak, "When I first fought the Ra- Zac, Galbatorix had placed a number of protective spells on them â€" making them harder to kill; These Ra- Zac would not have that luxury, though magic can only be used on what you can see or sense â€" which still presents a problem. â€"â€" And there's another matter... This Ra- Zac," Eragon paused â€" nodding towards the corpse of the floor, "... Is young, by their standards â€" less than eighty years- old... That can mean only one thing: They've built a new nest, and that means there's no telling how many more there may be..."

To everyone's surprise, Gobber spoke next, "Hang on... Did you say this thing was 'less than eighty years old', and 'still young, by their standards?' â€" What's that supposed to mean?"

"Like dragons, the fully- grown Ra- Zac â€" which is known as a 'Letherblaka', lay eggs. When they hatch, they encased in a shiny black exoskeleton. Once hooded and cloaked, they can 'imitate' the human- form, though they have an extra backward- bending leg- joint â€" which results in their unusual way of walking. Inside their

exoskeleton, however, their adult- body grows. Usually, it takes close to eighty- years, but " when ready, it breaks free as a fully- grown adult: Winged, and ready to hunt anything that lives and breathes. " Only a reasonably- large dragon could threaten a Letherblaka."

Hiccup spoke- up, then, "Saphira was just fighting one, wasn't she " Outside? " Our dragons showed us."

"Saphira has already told me... She and your dragons are now circling the hall " Trying to determine if there are more on the island, or at least near- by."

Than something else occurred to Hiccup, "You also said that 'The Riders' were going to finish what you'd started... You're going to call for reinforcements " Aren't you, Ebrithiln?"

"Yes " And the sooner the better, as it may take several weeks for others to prepare, than make the journey." With that, Eragon filled a bowl with water, turned and walked to one side of the hall. There, he began to speak in the Ancient Language... The water in the bowl rose into the air, than spread out to form a flat disk...

... Than an image of a beautiful woman appeared in the center of the water- disk, and Eragon said, "Atra esterni ono thelduin, Arya Shadeslayer..."

****Part Two " Arya Shadeslayer****

The woman whose image had appeared in the water- disk had captivated every male- Viking in the Great Hall, but the way in which she said _"Eragon"_... seemed to carry a sense of closeness " as though these two 'knew each- other very well'...

As the two of them spoke in the Ancient Language, none of their initial conversation made sense to the Vikings...

Once the traditional greetings had been observed, Arya smiled and said, "Eragon - What a pleasant surprise! How are you?"

Eragon responded by bringing her up- to- date with the latest progress with his new students and other such information- tidbits. (He'd kept her fairly up- to- date, so there wasn't much more to say.)

After several minutes had passed, he got to the matter at hand: "... I'm afraid the initial reason I've contacted you is... less than pleasant: I have just had an encounter with a Ra- Zac. He is dead " of course, but from what he said before he died... Arya, they've built a new nest in the far- north: I'm sure of it." Eragon gestured behind him " at the corpse of the Ra- Zac, where it lay on the floor of the Great Hall.

Arya's eyes found the Ra- Zac, and her expression darkened. Than " suddenly, she switched to English, "It would seem that our earlier efforts were not as 'thorough' as we'd hoped... Fortunately, many of our Order have already gathered here " A fair number report having had visions laden with an ominous sense of foreboding. I shall relay your news to the other elders, and Firnen and I shall accompany our force north. " I will keep you informed of our preparations." Than

â€" switching back to the Ancient Language, she added, "It will be good to see you again, Eragon." â€" To which Eragon responded in kind...

A moment later, Arya's image faded from the disk of water â€" than Eragon directed the water back into the bowl, and returned to the center of the hall.

****Part Three â€" Aftermath****

There were several minutes of silence, following the end of Eragon and Arya's conversation. The crowd had, it seemed, finally fully-learned that asking for answers would only delay their getting them...

But when â€" at last, Eragon spoke, he directed his words to his students, "You and your dragons should try to get some rest â€" if you can." Eragon paused, and sighed, "Normally, I would not introduce this until later in your training, but â€" due to the circumstances, it would be prudent for you to know how to kill with magic: We shall broach that topic on the morrow."

Then Eragon turned his gaze on the others in the hall, "Given the new circumstances, I would advise all of you to remain indoors at night â€" regardless of what you might hear..."

Someone in the crowd burst into speech, "If there're more of them, we should gather provisions and make our stand in here â€" where we know it's safe!"

Before others could start adding their voices to the first, Eragon continued, "... I can place spells on all of your homes that will inform Saphira and I if anyone tries to force their way in: Magic cannot be used to _detect_ the Ra- Zac _themselves_, but a spell designed to tell me if a door is broken- down will do so regardless of who breaks it: As long as none of you invite the Ra- Zac in for supper, you'll be perfectly safe."

There were no further objections.

****_To be continued..._****

10. Chapter 10

****Chapter Ten****

****Part One â€" Casting Wards****

They got an early start, the following morning â€" In fact, the sun had only just risen when the three Vikings and their dragons arrived in the clearing, and presented themselves to Eragon and Saphira.

Once Saphira and the other dragons had flown off, Eragon started their own lesson â€" on the ground...

"As I told you yesterday, I would not usually broach the subject of fighting with magic until later in your training â€" however, yesterday's 'encounter' will make certain 'changes' necessary." After

a moment of silence, Eragon continued, "Over the course of the next week, I will cover three main topics: The casting of protective-spells â€" or 'wards', How to store energy within gemstones, and... an introduction on how to kill with magic. â€" We will spend a set amount of time on each of these daily, so that each topic will receive an equal amount of attention. We will begin with casting wards..."

For the next three hours, Eragon taught them the wording for several different types of wards: Wards against physical- harm â€" Wards to protect the person they were bound to from poisoned food or drink, and more besides... Eragon also reminded them â€" on several occasions â€" of the risk that accompanied the wards they cast: "They can only protect you for so long as you have the energy to maintain them â€" and, as with any other spell â€" if the demands placed on them should exceed what energy you can provide, they will kill you."

And so they first practiced and memorized the wording of the spells, than they cast their first sets of wards â€" and bound them to themselves...

****Part Two â€" Storing Energy in Gemstones ****

Eragon had told them, the previous evening, that he would be instructing them in how to store energy within gemstones â€" and had asked each of them to bring some item inlaid with at least one stone, when they came to the clearing the following morning...

Hiccup brought a gold armband, inlaid with six fair- sized rubies â€" one of the pieces from his share of the treasure that had belonged to, and hidden by, Hamish the Second...

Astrid also wore a gold armband â€" a lot like Hiccup's, only inlaid with five diamonds of a respectable size...

Fishlegs had brought a simple pendant made of bronze, and inlaid with jade the size of his thumb.

Eragon inspected their gemstones, and nodded in approval, "These will do nicely..." Then the second part of the days' lesson began...

After an hour had passed, Hiccup paused to consider the small amount of energy he and the others had stored within their respective stones, and said, "Ebrithil... How are we going to store enough energy to do anything before the other Riders get here?"

Both Astrid and Fishlegs looked up â€" uncertainly, as though they'd been starting to wonder the same thing themselves...

"On your own, you wouldn't be able to â€" That is true," Eragon told them. "I would suggest that you make a point of transferring what energy you can, as often as you can â€" but this should help to start you off..." With that, Eragon lifted his right hand â€" and the mark on his palm began to glow: A trickle of light seemed to flow from his mark, and â€" splitting into three separate streams, flowed into one of the stones on Hiccup and Astrid's armbands â€" and the stone in Fishlegs' pendant... â€"â€" A moment later, the flow of energy ceased...

When Hiccup reached out to the stone he'd been trying to fill, he could hardly believe what he sensed: The stone now held close to ten-times what he'd stored within it... " From the expressions on Astrid's and Fishlegs' faces, the same was true with their own gemstones...

Finally, Astrid said, "Ebrithiln... Are you sure you want to be giving us energy from your own supply?" I mean... Not to seem ungrateful, but... You told the rest of Berk that you and Saphira would keep watch at night " and you train us during the day..." " Astrid's voice trailed off...

"You underestimate how much energy I've been able to set- aside, Astrid." Eragon smiled, "Besides, I no longer require 'sleep' as you would understand it " and I have not since I was 'changed' during the first 'Agaiti Blodren' I attended." Seeing that Hiccup was about to speak, Eragon held up a hand, and continued, "Whenever I need to rest, I enter a sort of trance- state " during which I retain full awareness of my surroundings. " It's a very convenient arrangement, I'll admit... " But enough of this for now: It is time we moved on to our final topic for the day..."

****Part Three " To Kill With Magic...****

"There are a near- infinite number of ways that one may kill with magic," Eragon began. "The cleverer or more open- minded you are, the more ways you could devise. Today, and in the days following, I will instruct you in some of the more 'basic' methods " Others will have to wait until you are advanced enough to use them. Now, we begin..."

By the time their dragons returned, Hiccup, Astrid, and Fishlegs had learned four ways to inflict instant death " several of which, much to their surprise " were not entirely new to them...

By using the word 'letta' " which meant 'stop', they could literally stop someone's heart... They could send a pebble flying through the air " aiming and accelerating it with magic " so it'd punch- through their target like a crossbow- bolt...

The mere ease with which it could be done was frightening... And the knowledge that they still had much to learn " was perhaps scarier still...

An hour later...

Once they had returned to the Great Hall, and eaten supper " Astrid, Hiccup, Fishlegs and their dragons parted ways: Each to go home, and to bed. They knew well enough that tomorrow would be a busy day...

****_To be continued..._****

11. Chapter 11

****Chapter Eleven****

****Part One " The Bond between Rider and Dragon: A Truth**

Revealed**

Their lessons resumed the following morning â€" although not quite as early...

The moment they landed in the clearing, they got the feeling that today's lesson would not be like yesterdays' â€" or any that had preceded it.

"This morning, you â€" Toothless, Stormfly, and Meatlug, will go..." â€" **_ '...with me, and we will review...' _** â€" "... those topics that we..." â€" **_ '... have covered so far. Then_****...' _** â€" "... after you have eaten, we..." â€" **'... ****_will begin to explore...' _** â€" "... the true nature of the bond..." â€" **'...that exists between...' _** â€" "... a Dragon and Rider."

With that, Saphira and the other dragons took to the air â€" and gradually faded from view...

For several minutes, none of them spoke, then a thought occurred to Hiccup... One that seemed almost too incredible to be true...

Hiccup felt almost sure he was about to be disappointed, but he asked the question: "It wasn't just our minds that were linked when you forged the bonds between us and our dragons, was it? â€" Our souls... our identities..."

Eragon nodded, and finished Hiccup's sentence, "...Have been welded on a primal- level: Yes. The bond between each of you and your dragon has become more that it could ever have become on its own, and â€" soon enough, you will learn its full implications. But â€" for now, we have other matters to attend to."

Eragon then sent Astrid and Fishlegs to the two smaller clearings â€" "to either meditate, or to add to the store of energy in your gemstone(s)" â€" while Eragon 'tested' Hiccup on the material they'd covered so far.

About an hour and a-half later, Astrid jolted back to full- awareness in her clearing â€" having sensed Hiccup's approach. A moment later, he came into view, and told her that Eragon wanted her to return to the main clearing...

After another hour and a-half, Astrid was sent to deliver the same message to Fishlegs.

When Fishlegs finished, Eragon sent him to bring Astrid and Hiccup back to the main clearing, while he awaited their dragons â€" who should be returning shortly...

Part Two â€" The Bond between Rider and Dragon: The Nature of the Bond

After eating a hurried lunch, riders and dragons returned to the clearing â€" All of them eager to understand the true nature of the connection that bound them...

It did not begin as they would have expected...

"Riders: Have any of you ever tried to contact your dragon with your

minds?"

"I've never tried to reach out to Toothless," Hiccup admitted, "Though I sometimes see what he sees â€" Like when Saphira was fighting the Letherblaka â€" outside the Great Hall..." The others added a few of their own examples to Hiccup's...

"There is so much more to your bond than that: Feelings, images, and sensations can â€" and should â€" flow between the two of you like ripples in a lake. In combat, it is not uncommon for a rider and dragon to merge their minds completely â€" to the point that they act and think as one. Furthermore, when the two of you are apart â€" you should be able to know where the other is, or if they've been injured..." For a moment, Eragon looked troubled â€" than he nodded... "Yes â€" That might be it..."

Before anyone could ask, Saphira repeated her comment so they could all hear, **_'As I just told Eragon, it is possible that you have kept your connections closed â€" and your identities separate â€" because it might never have occurred to you to look for them: Try, now...'_**

Feeling a little apprehensive, the three Viking- Riders retreated within their minds... To the rider's surprise â€" unlike the rest of the world, their dragon's presence didn't grow fainter... the deeper they went: To the contrary, they grew stronger â€" As though their dragon was 'inside' their mind... as well as outside. Than â€" the next thing they knew, they were looking through the eyes of their respective dragons: Staring at _themselves..._

The shock jolted them back to their own bodies, but â€" unlike before, they retained their awareness of their dragon- partner: Their bonds with their dragons had finally opened...

Eragon appeared both satisfied, and a little concerned â€" ('A strange combination', Hiccup thought â€" and Toothless agreed â€" wordlessly.) â€" Then Eragon spoke, "Now that you have discovered the full potential of your connection â€" and how to open it, there are other things you must learn: How to defend your minds from external-threats, and how to close your link â€" to prevent pain from affecting your partner â€" should either of you take an injury. Once you have made some headway on those topics, you will be ready to start to practice fighting on dragon-back â€" which is an essential skill, for a dragon and rider..."

Their students dove into their newest lessons enthusiastically, and â€" after what seemed to be far less time than it should've taken, the sun began to drop low in the western sky: It was time to return to Berk for the night...

To be continued...

12. Chapter 12

Chapter Twelve

**Part One â€" News and Reminiscences... **

The following morning; Eragon, Hiccup, Astrid, Fishlegs and their

respective dragons gathered at the Great Hall for breakfast â€" along with the other villagers. (Saphira ate outside, of course â€" both to keep watch, and because she was _far_ too large to get inside...)

As they ate, the conversation never deviated from the same three topics: The Ra- Zac, the Letherblaka, and when the other Dragon Riders might arrive â€" as well as what would happen when they did...

Soon after his arrival, Eragon had informed them that Arya had contacted him, earlier that morning: Their reinforcements had left the Riders' Stronghold three days previously, and would arrive on Berk in five- to- seven days time. â€" The incoming force numbered one- hundred and twenty- seven Rider- and Dragon pairs, plus a third as many wild- dragons â€" who wanted to 'join the fun'. (It was this news that 'inspired' the previously- described conversations...)

After Eragon had delivered the news, there was several minutes of silence â€" as the listeners tried to wrap their minds around the idea of _a- hundred and twenty Dragon Riders_...

Finally, one of the children in the hall asked, "Will they be as big as Saphira?"

Eragon smiled, slightly, "A few will be close, but no â€" Saphira is the largest dragon any of us are like to see."

Another child chimed in, "Is Saphira the largest dragon ever?"

Eragon sighed, and said, "No â€" To the best of my knowledge, that honor belonged to Belgabad the Black..." Eragon was silent for a moment, and continued, "During Galbatorix's offensive, Belgabad â€" despite being a wild- dragon, flew to the Riders' aid... He was killed during the final battle." Another pause, then, "I saw his skeleton, when I visited what was once the Riders' stronghold - on the island of Vroengard. Belgabad's skull alone was larger than Saphira, at that time... Even now, Belgabad would've been â€" by- far, the larger of the two."

They heard a low growl echoing from outside the hall, at that â€" but Eragon merely smiled... "Though as it happens, Saphira is a distant descendant of Belgabad â€" so, in time, I wouldn't be surprised to see her become his equal." â€" The low growl turned into a contented humming...

It was several minutes before the occupants of the hall remembered that their breakfast was getting cold, and returned to their food... â€"â€" Gradually, the sounds of conversation resumed...

****Part Two â€" To Fight with Your Mind...****

Close to an hour later, Hiccup and Toothless, Astrid and Stormfly, and Fishlegs and Meatlug arrived at the clearing, and presented themselves to Eragon and Saphira â€" who'd left the Great Hall a short time before they did...

To their mutual surprise, Saphira did not lead the other dragons into the sky â€" as they had every other day...

As before, Eragon and Saphira gave the instructions together, "Today, we shall..." "..." begin your instruction in...'...' "fighting with your mind, and..." "..." defending yourselves against...'...' "... similar attacks."

Astrid waited a moment " to be sure that they'd finished, before saying, "Umm, Ebrithilla... Why is this so important? " I mean... We know how to keep our minds closed, and with our dragons helping us, its not like anyone could..."

That was as far as she got: An instant later, Eragon's mind enveloped theirs " Hiccup, Astrid, Fishlegs, and their dragons... Seconds later, he had established full control over their minds, and their only thoughts were those that he permitted...

Then Eragon spoke " projecting his voice into their minds, '_If I were Galbatorix " or another of a similar disposition, we could even now be forcing the six of you to swear oaths of fealty to us: Each of you, as Rider and Dragon, has a particularly strong bond to the other " I am not sure exactly why... Perhaps because you 'chose' each-other even before the two of you were bonded... " Whatever the reason, you both have a responsibility to yourself and your partner to guard your own mind: Otherwise, an enemy could use your bond against you. " " Questions... No? Good._'

A moment later, Eragon's presence withdrew from their minds " and they were once again able to think as they would: Though Eragon had made no attempt to glean information from them, each of them found the experience humbling...

That being said, none of them were upset by the intrusion: It's always better to have a 'friend' point out a weakness in your defences, than have an enemy gloat after exploiting it...

"First, I will teach you how to defend your innermost thoughts from external penetration. Once you have a reasonably firm grasp of the concept, you will learn to attack with your mind " by trying to circumvent each-other's defences..."

And so they began...

****Part Three " An Unpleasant Revelation...****

Just as they were finishing up for the day, Hiccup felt a wave of anger surge through Toothless... The change in his expression instantly drew the attention of the others...

ASTRID: "Hiccup! " Are... Are you 'ok'?"

HICCUP: "I'm fine, but Toothless..."

TOOTHLESS: **'They started our war...'** The dragon spoke so they could all hear, and the anger in his voice rendered further explanation from Hiccup unnecessary... " " Through their bond, Toothless shared his thoughts " and conclusion, with Hiccup...

Then Hiccup and Toothless spoke together, "The Ra- Zac must have been living here since..." " **'... well before the Vikings first**

arrived.'** â€" "When our ancestors first came, the _Letherblaka_ attacked us _first_... and in the middle of the night!" â€" **'All they would've known, afterwards, was that the enemy attacked from the sky, and...'** â€" "... when they started to encounter the dragons, the Vikings attacked them!" â€" **'Then â€" out of a combination of anger and necessity, the dragons began to raid your people for food â€" to feed the Red- Death...'** â€" "... and it all escalated from there!"

After they finished, there was several moments of silence... Partly from the surprise of Hiccup and Toothless speaking in sync â€" but mostly because what they'd said, sounded just bad enough to be true...

An hour later...

They had returned to the Great Hall â€" where the other villagers had already gathered for supper... The moment Hiccup and Toothless had explained their discovery, shouts of outrage rose from the crowd...

Finally, Stoick managed to quiet the crowd. Then he turned to Eragon, "Is it possible? ... Could these unholy monsters have set us against the dragons?"

Eragon was silent for a moment, then, "The more I think of it, the more likely it seems: The dragons have always been the greatest enemies of both the Ra- Zac, and the Letherblaka: By setting your two races against each other, they simultaneously weaken the dragons and open opportunities to hunt freely, and blame their 'kills' on the dragons..." He fell silent then, deep in thought...

Stoick's face turned red with fury... Finally, he managed to force back his anger enough to say, "Once your Riders have arrived, we will join forces and rid the earth of these unnatural creatures! â€" They will pay for every drop of blood shed during our war â€" both our own, and that of the dragons!"

As soon as the words left Chief Stoick's mouth, the Great Hall echoed with roars of approval...

To be continued...

13. Chapter 13

**Chapter 13 â€" A 'Training Exercise' **

Part One â€" An Attack, An Opportunityâ€|

The following morning, the inhabitants of Berk gathered in the Great Hall for breakfast. The meal went without incident, but as they were about to leave, one of the men on watch rushed in â€" with word that a half- dozen boats â€" bearing the Outcasts' crest â€" had been sighted, making their way inlandâ€|

There was a brief moment of silence â€" after everything that had happened of late, it had been as though Alvin the Treacherous had ceased to existâ€| Finally, Stoick said, "To the boats! â€" We'll head them off before they make landfall!"

Calm as ever, Eragon rose to his feet, "Or you could let them land, and learn â€" to their own dismay, that the rules of their little game have changed. My students are not fully- trained â€" I'll admit, but they should be more than capable of dealing with your 'uninvited guests'. If necessary, I can assist them."

This was followed by several minutes of silence, then Stoick spoke-upâ€| "Are you suggesting that we send Hiccup, Astrid, Fishlegs, and their dragons to fight six boat-loads of Outcasts on their own?"

Eragon raised an eyebrow; "I am suggesting that you allow the Outcasts to make landfall, and to see your Dragon Riders in action. I think it would be unwise to let their first time in actual combat as a Rider and Dragon to be against creatures as dangerous as the Ra-Zac. â€| I had intended to introduce fighting from dragon- back in the next few days, but Alvin has provided an excellent opportunity for a training- exercise. Besides, as I said â€" Saphira and I can always join in, if the need arisesâ€|"

As soon as Eragon had finished speaking, a feeling of eager/ nervous-anticipation filled the hallâ€| Stoick noticed this, and had to admit that the idea had some appeal, but at the same timeâ€|

Hiccup spoke- up, then, "We can do this, dad." Behind him, Astrid and Fishlegs nodded â€" looking a little nervous, but determined as wellâ€|

Stoick hesitated, then nodded and said, "Very well, but be careful â€" all of youâ€|"

****Part Two â€" Pre-combat Instructionsâ€|****

Immediately after leaving the hall, Eragon turned to face his and Saphira's students â€" specifically, the Riders â€" and said, "Before you go, would I be right to assume that the three of you have already placed the necessary wards around your dragons?"

The three Riders responded in the affirmative, and Eragon nodded â€" clearly pleased. "Good. Now, 'your wards will only protect you forâ€|'" He let the sentence driftâ€|

Astrid picked up where Eragon left off: "'â€| so long as we have the energy to maintain them."

Eragon nodded, and continued, "Never will a higher demand be placed on them than when you are in battle, so do everything possible to avoid what blows you can. The same goes for using magic: If you must use it, try to do as much as you can, with as little energy as possible. This is what the energy- reserves you've been building are meant for, but until you can create a sizable reserve, use what reserves you have sparingly."

He took a moment then, to inspect the amount of energy each of them had set aside â€" and he seemed a little surprised by what he found. Then a satisfied smile grew on his face, "Your dragons have been adding to your stores as well, I seeâ€| That's good: Alvin will be in for an unpleasant surprise."

This brought them back to the moment, and Hiccup couldn't help but ask, "Ebrithilnâ€¦ Are you sure we're ready for this?" â€"â€" Astrid and Fishlegs glanced up, at this: All six of them were confident in their abilities, butâ€¦

"If I didn't, I would not have suggested it." Eragon told them, "However, You must believe it yourselves for it to be so: If you expect the worst to happen, you will only make that outcome more likely." Looking at each of them in turn, then. "It has been almost a month since we began our lessons, and you have made considerable progress, in that time: Don't allow yourself to become overconfident, but do not underestimate what you have learned. Now, it will soon be time for you to 'greet' your guestsâ€¦"

****Part Three â€" Riders V.S. Outcasts****

They saw the six incoming ships immediately, once they and the Vikings who'd accompanied them reached the cliff top that overlooked the harbour. â€" They were still a ways offshore, but approaching fastâ€¦

Wordlessly, the three of them â€" Hiccup, Astrid, and Fishlegs mounted their dragons, and got ready to take- offâ€¦ They were all still a little nervous but also eager to make a good impression, and to show the others what they'd learnedâ€¦ (They could hardly believe they'd been in training for almost a monthâ€¦ The days had blurred together, making it seem like only a few weeksâ€¦)

When the Outcasts' ships were perhaps twenty- minutes from making landfall â€" and they could see Alvin clearly, Hiccup and Toothless said, "I think thatâ€¦" â€" *_â€¦is far enough.'_**

Then the three dragons shot into the air â€" with their riders on their backsâ€¦

Before the Outcasts had time to do more than register that there were dragons bearing down on them, the dragons had made a full loop around the six ships â€" each dragon breathing fire in a single, unbroken stream... As the flames hit the water, a wall of mist rose into the air â€" briefly hiding the ships from viewâ€¦

Hiccup, Astrid and Fishlegs had seen glimpses of their dragons' training- sessions with Saphira â€" and of time spent breathing fire on massive stone pillarsâ€¦ to increase their endurance by trying to melt them. Now the three Riders understood that their dragons were no longer limited by their one-time shot- limits: Now they could breath fire longer, and more oftenâ€¦ (There were other topics that they'd covered â€" secrets of the dragons, though these had not been relayed to them.)

A shout from below brought their attention back to the present: The mist was fading, and their presence on the backs of their dragons had been noticed. Even from where they hovered, they could hear Alvin's bellowing: "CATAPALUTS! â€" CROSSBOWS! SHOOT THOSE BLASTED DRAGONS OUT OF THE SKY!"

The boulders, they knew, would be a problem: Their wards _could_ protect them, but the energy it would require to deflect even one boulder would be more than they could afford to lose. Since each of the six boats had two catapults, it'd be hard to evade both them and

the bolts " once they started to fly"

Wordlessly, Hiccup and Toothless swung around and shot towards the two nearest boats: Hiccup used a spell to cut the lines on two catapults, while Toothless 'saw to' two more" Some of the damage they inflicted could be fixed, but not in time to use again in this battle.

Seconds later they'd risen back into the air, Astrid saw six crossbow- bolts arcing towards Toothless! " Then they swerved around the black dragon, and came to hover in the air next to Hiccup! A moment later, he spoke in the Ancient Language, and the bolts arced back towards Alvin's boats " glittering with black energy. When they hit, there was a pair of muffled 'boom's, and the boat started to list to one side"

Two boats crippled, and another one sinking"

Astrid had to grin. Hiccup had clearly made 'a few tweaks' to his wards: Any long- distance weapons directed at him would become part of _his _arsenal"

"Nice one!" Astrid called over, "You're going to have to show me that spell, later!" Hiccup grinned, and nodded back " Astrid was pretty sure she blushed, but neither of them commented on it"

Below, the boat that Hiccup's redirected- arrows had hit was sinking " though slowly enough for those on board to evacuate onto the ships nearest to them: The ships with the ruined catapults"

Then they saw that the other three boats were mere minutes from making landfall " despite Fishlegs and Meatlug's attempts to slow them down " They had slowed the Outcasts, but they'd also made them angry"

Seeing this, Toothless and Stormfly surged towards the beach...

Once they'd re-joined Fishlegs and Meatlug, Rider and Dragon joined their minds " merging their identities just as they'd been taught, then the fight went hand- to- hand"

Over the past few weeks " since they'd joined Hiccup, both Astrid and Fishlegs had made considerable progress with their swordsmanship, as well as matters of the mind and magic... (Astrid's preferred weapon was her axe, but today, she too had chosen to use a sword")

All three of them had learned to predict their opponents' strikes, and were able to evade almost every blow " though their wards deflected a few, much to their opponents' confusion.

Their bond to their dragons also proved it's worth: More than once, Hiccup or Astrid would be fighting an Outcast " than duck an instant before their dragon's tail swung over their head, catching whoever they were fighting directly in the face"

They did not aim to kill " though they inflicted an uncountable number of cuts to their foes" Instead, they dodged blows " allowing the Outcast warriors to wear themselves out. As the favoured strategy of the day was 'slash, hack, and repeat " until you get

killed or run out of enemies', it didn't take longâ€|

Finally, Alvin swore, and accepted the inevitable: " BACK TO THE BOATS! â€" BACK TO THE BOATS!"

Cursing, the Outcast warriors obeyed â€" exchanging blows, as they retreated. More than one of them was supporting or dragging one of their comrades, as they went. Finally, several of Alvin's men pushed the two boats that had landed off the beach, before clambering in, and raising their sails.

Feeling a little stunned, Astrid and Stormfly, Hiccup and Toothless, and Fishlegs and Meatlug stood â€" watching the Outcasts retreatâ€|

They were just getting over the shock of their victory, when Hiccup saw an evil gleam in Alvin's eyes, before he shouted, "READY THE CATAPULTS! â€" AIM FOR THE CLIFF- TOP!"

Chuckles reached their ears, as the men on Alvin's ships obeyedâ€| As soon as Alvin's boats were far away enough to get the necessary height, a volley of six boulders were flung towards the cliff-top â€" where most of the villagers were gatheredâ€|

Eragon stepped forward â€" and lifted his right- hand, palm- out: Fifty feet from the cliff-top where he and the villagers stood, the boulders froze in mid-air â€" their forward momentum instantly dissipating. A moment passed, then the boulders dropped into the water with a great 'SPLASH'â€|

All eyes fixed on Eragon, and â€" for several minutes, nobody spokeâ€| Despite the distance separating them, Alvin and his men seemed to know that this was not someone they wanted to go up againstâ€|

After a minute, the Outcasts returned to their various tasks â€" clearly eager to be gone. Gradually, their boats picked up speed â€" and finally, vanished into the distanceâ€|

Just like that, it was overâ€|

****Part Four â€" Aftermath****

Less than a minute later, Hiccup, Astrid, Fishlegs, and their dragons landed a short distance away from where the other villagers waited. Even before their dragons' claws touched the ground, the villagers were moving forwards. The air was filled with roars of approval, and a general applauseâ€|

When Eragon stepped forward, the noise died down. The Rider hadn't joined in the shouting, but they got the feeling he was pleased. When he reached them, he said, "That was well done, all of you: The six of you are learning to make good use of the bonds between you and your bonded- partner." Then Eragon turned to Hiccup, "And I see you made a few modifications to your wards â€" Impressiveâ€|"

Immediately, people started asking questionsâ€| A few of them, Eragon answered â€" others, he didn't.

Finally, he turned to his students, "You have made considerable

progress, these past weeks â€" more that I might have expected. The rest of today is yours to do with, as you will. We will continue your lessons tomorrow, at the usual place."

The six of them bowed their heads in acknowledgement, and said, "Yes, Ebrithiln." / **'Yes, Ebrithiln.'**

_To be continuedâ€| _

14. Chapter 14

Chapter 14 â€" A Day- Off, and A New Mysteryâ€|

The six of them were both surprised â€" and more than a little pleased, to have been given the day off. More specifically, they were pleased by what it meant: Being told that they were 'making progress' was good, but being told that they'd been doing well enough to take a day- long break was something else entirelyâ€|

It wasn't long before the other villagers began to return â€" somewhat reluctantly â€" to their various tasks. Every few steps, a few would glance back â€" as though still trying to process the events they'd seen, mere minutes beforeâ€|

A few minutes after the villagers had vanished from view, Eragon and Saphira â€" who, they guessed â€" had been conversing silently, departed. Not long after, Fishlegs and Meatlug flew- off together â€" Meatlug to snack on some chunks of granite, and Fishlegs to 'listen to the thoughts of the forest'â€|

This left Astrid, Hiccup, and their dragons alone, on the cliff-top... Astrid's face was a little pink, and she knew he must've noticed. In an attempt to distract him, Astrid said, "Soâ€| How exactly did you modify your wards?"

For the better part of the next hour, Hiccup both explained the 'tweaks' he'd made, and helped Astrid to do the same with her own wards. He also showed her a few of his other experiments â€" Mainly spells that would help preserve his own strength by making subtle changes in items that would require greater strength to alter later on. â€"â€" For example, he'd bound his ward for recognizing and neutralizing poisons to another one of the gemstones in his armband. (If triggered, the ward would neutralize the poison by affecting the poisoned- object directly â€" rather than having to neutralize it, while also trying to prevent it from affecting him. The amount of energy saved wouldn't be huge, but every little bit could help later on.)

As Hiccup helped her make the second set of modifications to her wards, Astrid knew she was blushing â€" and, though Hiccup never 'called- her out' on it, she could see the small smile on his face (- and this did not help her attempt to hide/ stop her blushing).

Finally â€" after they'd finished, the two of them mounted their dragons, and they took to the air.

A short while laterâ€|

They'd been flying for close to an hour â€" mostly in silence, as they enjoyed the feel of the air on their faces and skinâ€" or scales and wings, in the case of the dragons. Over time â€" and without much thought, the dragons drifted towards the mountain- ranges where they'd usually train with Saphiraâ€"

Then, out of nowhere, Stormfly 'spoke' â€" so they could all hear, ****'Look â€" It's Saphira, and Eragonâ€" '****

The rest of them looked down and saw the their teachers â€" sitting in another fair- sized clearing. At the same moment, Eragon and Saphira looked up â€" no doubt having heard Stormly's comment, just as they hadâ€" â€" Astrid had a feeling that the dragon had spoken- up to warn those below that they were there, but there was no reason why she'd need to, as far as Astrid could seeâ€"

For a moment, they saw Eragon, Saphira, and what appeared to be three, fairly- large stonesâ€" that seemed to glow from the insideâ€"

By the time they landed, however, there was no sign of them â€" and Hiccup and Astrid decided to act as though they hadn't seen anything. However, both had a feeling that Eragon and Saphira had been having a very in- depth 'conversation' with these 'stones' â€" and both wished they knew what they wereâ€"

They were jolted back to their surroundings by Eragon's voice, "Ah, I take it you decided to fit- in an afternoon flightâ€" It's an excellent day for it."

Finding his voice, Hiccup asked, "Uhâ€" Where are we? â€" I don't remember there being a clearing in this part of the islandâ€" His voice drifted off.

Eragon shrugged, "That would be because there _wasn't_ one here. I cast a spell to shift the trees â€" and their root- systems back a few hundred feet, so Saphira would have a space to land," He gestured around the clearing, "And so I would have a space of my own."

As the four new- arrivals looked in the direction that Eragon had indicated, they were surprised to find a table and a chair â€" Even a small fire- pit. Most surprising of all: The furniture appeared to have been grown out of larger treesâ€" As though massive twin birch trees had decided to sprout a kitchen- set out the side of their trunksâ€"

But nowhere was there any sign of the 'glowing stones' that they'd seen â€" briefly, from aboveâ€"

"Also," Eragon continued, "This is â€" as you may have guessed, where Saphira brings your dragons when she is instructing them." As he spoke, Eragon nodded upwards â€" towards the cliffâ€"

Looking up, they saw what must have been several hundred places where the stone appeared to have been meltedâ€" Several were clearly the work of Saphira, but the rest â€" they knew, had been the work of their own dragons: This was the place they'd seen â€" in their glimpses of dragons' lessonsâ€"

Mere seconds after realizing this, Hiccup also noticed that the sun

was not far from settingâ€¦ Feeling a little surprised that he was able to form the words, Hiccup said, "Weâ€¦ We should probably be heading back." â€œâ€œ Somehow, the day was already coming to a close, but â€œ to Hiccup and Astrid, it had felt like only a few hoursâ€¦

****_To be continuedâ€¦_****

15. Chapter 15

****Chapter 15 â€œ The Greatest of Secrets****

The following morningâ€¦

Hiccup, Astrid, Fishlegs and their dragons arrived at the usual clearing â€œ as per their instructions. They landed â€œ Hiccup, Astrid and Fishlegs dismounted, and the six of them presented themselves to Eragon â€œ who was sitting on the ground, and Saphira â€œ who was curled- up near- by, though very much awakeâ€¦

Eragon acknowledged their arrival with a nod, and gestured for them to join him. Once they'd found a comfortable spot, Eragon said, "The topic we are about to discuss is one of the utmost importance: It is the greatest secret of Our Order." He paused for a moment â€œ to let that sink- in, then continuedâ€¦ "However, due to the nature of this information, we will require each of you to swear â€œ in the Ancient Language, that you will not: tell, record, or even to discuss this topic where any others may hear or learn of it."

This was followed by a stunned silence, broken when Hiccup said, "Thisâ€¦ sounds important."

Eragon inclined his head, "It is this knowledge that allowed Galbatorix to acquire his power, and â€œ there by, lead to the destruction of the First Order, and the near- extinction of the Alagasian- dragons."

This was followed by an even longer silence. And, this time, it was Astrid who spoke- up, "Youâ€¦ You're actually willing to tell us this?"

"Normally, such information would be entrusted only to the most senior- Riders â€œ and perhaps a few others. I would not have discussed it for a while yet, but the final- decision is not mine to make â€œ not in this."

More than a little stunned by what they were hearing, the six of them swore their oaths of secrecy â€¦

Satisfied, Eragon began, "At its most basic level, Galbatorix stole his power from the dragons whose bodies he had slain. You see: Within all dragons, there exists a hard, gemlike structure â€œ called the 'Eldunari'. At any point in life, a dragon can transfer their 'essence' into their 'Eldunari' â€œ even disgorge it. When the dragon dies, their consciousness also retreats into their 'Eldunari' â€œ thus outliving the death of their body."

The enormity of this revelation was not lost on Astrid, butâ€¦ "Why would he go to the trouble, though? â€œ Killing a dragon if it'll

just keep on living in a different form?"

"Power, and knowledge," Eragon replied. "When the dragon's body dies, they bring their strength and knowledge with them â€" into their 'Eldunari'. Over the next two or three years, the amount of energy within continues to grow â€" until the 'heart' is fully saturated: The amount of energy it could hold would depend on the size of the 'heart' â€" which depends, in turn, on the size of the dragon." He sighed, "When Galbatorix killed his first dragon â€" at the start of his campaign against the Old Order, he also stole that dragon's 'Eldunari'. He then went into hiding for several years, during which he broke the mind of the dragon within that 'heart', and forced it to swear fealty to him in the Ancient Language. He then targeted another dragon â€" and another. Aside from breathing fire, dragons cannot call on magic on-demand â€" so they had no real defence against himâ€¦ And he had 'another way' of dealing with dragons who were partnered to Ridersâ€¦"

Toothless growled, "'What 'other way' is this? We are not weak for having bonded, nor would we be fighting alone!'"

Eragon nodded in agreement, "That much is true, Toothless â€" and it is why Galbatorix would target not the dragon, but the Rider. He would find a way to separate Dragon and Rider â€" however briefly, and then ambush the Rider. He would then present the dragon with a choice: 'Attack â€" and your Rider dies, Flee â€" and you leave your Rider to suffer. Surrender your 'Eldunari', and your deaths will be quick'... Then he would torture the Rider. Sooner or later, the dragon would reach the point when they could no longer stand to see their Rider in such agony â€" and they would submit, and surrender their 'Eldunari'."

As they listened, Hiccup, Astrid and Fishlegs felt a change in their dragons' moods: From proud and defiant toâ€¦ subdued, and what might have been a trace of fear... â€" As each of them realized that, if faced with such a choice, they would have done the exact same thingâ€¦

A moment later, Stormfly spoke- up â€" sounding as subdued as she, Toothless, and Meatlug now feltâ€¦ "'How many? â€" How many of our cousins did the Traitor- King enslave?'"

"After we killed Galbatorix, we liberated close to eleven- hundred 'Eldunari' from his citadel. Of those, only four- hundred and seventeen still wished to continue living. â€" The rest of them asked us to break their 'Eldunari', and let them find peace in a true death." They could hear the sorrow in Eragon's voice â€" and knew that he'd done all he could to convince every last one of those 'Eldunari' to hold- on to lifeâ€¦

Suddenly, two thoughts leapt to the front of Hiccup's mind at the same time: "Yesterdayâ€¦ When Astrid and I found you in your clearing! â€" You were talking to three of the 'Eldunari' that were saved!"

A small smile appeared on Eragon's face, "Yes: They were 'Eldunari'. And 'no' â€" Only one of those three had been taken by Galbatorix." There was a brief pause, then he asked, "Would either of you happen to remember what colors they were?"

Surprised, Hiccup and Astrid thought back to the previous afternoonâ€|

Hiccup spoke first, "I remember there was one that looked like a bright- yellowâ€| maybe gold?"

Eragon nodded, "That would be Glaedr â€" He and his Rider were the last survivors from the Old Order. Glaedr instructed Saphira, while his Rider, an elf by the name of Oromis â€" oversaw my lessons. The last time we saw them, Glaedr entrusted his 'Eldunari' to us â€" so his knowledge, strength, and guidance would be available to us."

Astrid chimed in, then, "There was a white one, too â€" Wasn't there?"

Eragon nodded again, "That is Umaroth â€" his Rider was the elf, Vrael: The Leader of the Old Orderâ€| Galbatorix killed him in- person. Umaroth's 'Eldunari' was among those that The Riders hid â€" along with the dragons' eggs â€" in a secret chamber; deep beneath one of the mountains on what was once our Island Stronghold. A chamber that was dubbed 'The Vault of Souls'."

That caught their attention: As it was a place he'd mentioned before â€" though only briefly, in the story he'd told Hiccupâ€| (All he'd said of it at the time, was that he'd "found much- needed aid within" itâ€|)

Eragon continued, then, "The third 'Eldunari' was blue â€" and this one we did liberate from Galbatorix's citadel. Initially, the dragon within had asked me to smash her 'Eldunari', but once she'd told me her name â€" and I told her about Saphira, it changed everything. The dragon's name was Vervada â€" She was Saphira's mother. Since then, her 'Eldunari' has travelled with us: she, Glaedr, and Umaroth help us 'reach' some of the others â€" if they've retreated within their own 'Eldunari'.

Hiccup's eyes widened, "Waitâ€| 'Others?' â€| 'They?' â€" You have more 'Eldunari' with you?"

Eragon nodded, "Whenever I travel, I am accompanied by forty- three 'hearts' â€" including the three I've named. Galbatorix forced them to do terrible things, so I decided the best way to help them recover is to dilute the bad with good. I take a different group with me whenever I travel, and draw upon their power to heal and do other such worksâ€|

"Many of the 'Eldunari' have grown adept at enhancing spells cast by another magic- user, and are able to achieve feats to human or elf could achieve on their ownâ€| The re-growing of lost- limbs, for instance." As he spoke, he turned to give Hiccup and Toothless a significant lookâ€|

Hiccup felt like he'd forgotten how to breatheâ€| "The 'Eldunari'â€| The 'Eldunari' healed my footâ€| and Toothless's tail- fin?"

"I cast a spell to heal and renew â€" though such a spell on its own would have done little. The 'Eldunari' took my spell, and altered it â€" in ways not even I can describeâ€| So, in a way: Yes." Eragon paused for a moment, then said, "And doing so helped them almost as

much as it helped the two of you; considering what Galbatorix had forced them to do."

Feelingâ€| overwhelmed, Hiccup and Toothless spoke as one, "Can we speakâ€|" â€" '***â€| to them, Ebrithillan?'**

But it was not Eragon or Saphira who answered, but an older voice â€" one that boomed and echoed through their minds, ***'****_YOU DO NOT NEED TO ASK PERMISSION, HATCHLINGS: SPEAK, AND WE WILL ANSWERâ€|_****' **

Even as they sat there, the air around them seemed to fill with a chorus of whispers â€" though there was no sign of the creatures that were speaking to themâ€|

To be continuedâ€|

16. Chapter 16

Chapter Sixteen

Part One â€" The Elder Dragons

For several minutes, Hiccup, Toothless, Astrid, Stormfly, Fishlegs, and Meatlug sat in stunned silence: It was almost too much to processâ€|

The initial flow of thoughts that had come pouring into their minds had, for the most part, faded to silence â€" though they could still sense the presence of the vast, alien minds of the Elder Dragonsâ€| They seemed to be waiting for the Vikings and their dragons to finish processing these newest of revelationsâ€|

At last, Hiccup and Toothless opened their minds and â€" speaking in the Ancient Language, said, "Thank- youâ€| Thank- you for healing us, Ebrithillan." / **'Thank- youâ€| Thank- you for healing us, Ebrithillan.'**

The moment they'd finished speaking, a new wave of memories came pouring into Hiccup and Toothless's minds â€" From the dragons who'd altered Eragon's initial spell: Memories of their reshaping the spell, the sense of satisfaction that doing so had given themâ€| and fleeting glimpses of the darker memories that doing what they had had allowed them to cast awayâ€| â€"â€" Had they not been so similar, the flow of memories would have overwhelmed both Hiccup and Toothlessâ€| Then one of the dragons spoke, ***'****_WE HEALED YOU, BUT THE TWO OF YOU HELPED TO HEAL US AS WELL â€" WHETHER OR NOT YOU KNEW IT, AT THE TIMEâ€| WHETHER YOU SHOULD BE THANKING US, OR US YOU, I AM NOT SUREâ€|'_** As suddenly as it had come, the voice â€" and the flow of memories fadedâ€| as the minds of the dragons withdrew, slightlyâ€|

While Hiccup and Toothless had spoken so only the Eldunari would hear, the reply was heard by all of them. This startled the others out of their reveriesâ€|

For the rest of that morning, the Eldunari shared memory after memory with the young Riders and Dragons: Suggestions on how to reach the level of awareness that was the goal of the hours they spent

meditatingâ€¦ Observations they'd made about the natural worldâ€¦ And much more besides â€" though it was obvious that far more was being omitted: Topics that Eragon and Saphira had yet to introduce â€" or that they were otherwise unprepared forâ€¦

Just as they were about to return to Berk â€" for lunch, a question surfaced in Hiccup's mind. Once again, he opened his mind, and asked â€" both aloud and with his mind, "Ebrithillanâ€¦ Before Eragon told us about the 'Eldunari', he said that this information wasn't usually shared with new Ridersâ€¦"

One of the dragons had anticipated Hiccup's question before he could ask itâ€¦ **'*****_YOU ARE WONDERING WHY WE CHOSE TO TELL YOU, WHEN YOU ARE SO NEW A MEMBER OF OUR ORDER, ARE YOU NOT?'_** When Hiccup answered in the affirmative, amusement coloured the dragon's mindâ€¦ **_'BECAUSE: WHEN YOU AND YOUR COMPANIONS FACE THE RA- ZAC, WE WILL BE HELPING YOU.'_**

**Part Two â€" The Impending Arrival... **

In the Great Hall of Berkâ€¦

The midday- meal itself was uneventful. Afterwards, however, Eragon made an announcement that came as a surprise to everyone â€" despite the fact that it was not the first time the topic had come- up: "I have received another update from Arya: Our reinforcements should reach us by midday, the day after tomorrow. Close to a third of them will be human- riders, with a near- equal number of both Elves, and Urgals â€" Respectively." He paused, briefly â€" as a chorus of low murmurs rose, and then dwindled to silence. "While this is not a cause for concern, there are certain details that would be best to make public _prior_ to their arrivalâ€¦"

"I will start with the Elvesâ€¦" Everyone's thoughts went back to the image of Arya that had appeared â€" when Eragon had first contacted her. Eragon continued, "The Elves are an Elder Race: They are strong â€" both magically and physically. Most importantly, they consider courtesy to be the highest social- virtue: You do not want to offend an elf â€" _especially_ with off- hand commentsâ€¦ Are you hearing this, Snotlout?"

Snotlout's face went white, again â€" and he nodded earnestly, though he didn't say a word. (A gale of laughter filled the hall â€" at his reaction: The memory of Snotlout's comments â€" and his swordfight with Hiccup, wasn't going to be forgotten anytime soonâ€¦)

Eragon finished his explanation about the Elves â€" and even taught them a few of the easier- to- remember Elvin- greetingsâ€¦

Then Eragon proceeded to do the same with the Urgals' culture and greetings. As Eragon spoke, Hiccup could see some of the villagers' tension drain away â€" and he knew why: The Urgals were a warrior- people, and that was something the Vikings could easily relate to.

It took a just under an hour for Eragon to finish his explanation, and half- again as long for him to ensure â€" to his satisfaction, that his listeners had understood it allâ€¦

When he was satisfied that they did, Eragon nodded to his students

â€" who also got to their feet, and followed him out of the hall. They remounted their dragons, and set- off for the clearing â€" to pick- up where they'd left- offâ€|

To be continuedâ€|

17. Chapter 17

****Chapter Seventeen - The Dragon Riders****

****Part One â€" Arrival****

Two days laterâ€|

It was an hour before noon when the first of the coloured- dots appearedâ€| glittering, on the horizon. They were noticed almost immediately, but â€" at first, nobody could quite tell for sure what they wereâ€|

Before long, smaller dots began to appear â€" and the bigger ones began to take on a more recognizable form: Dragons â€" and massive dragons, at that: to be clearly visible at almost fifty miles outâ€|

Half an hour later, the dragons had more than halved the distance between them and Berk. By then, the massive green- dragon â€" which seemed to be leading the group, had become clearly visible. As soon as she saw him, Saphira let out a joyful trumpet. A moment later, it was answered by a blast of sound that made every house in the village shudder â€" and the air vibrateâ€|

The silence that descended over the village was absolute. Every set of eyes in the village of Berk was fixed on the first wave of incoming dragonsâ€|

Finally, Hiccup turned to Eragon and said, "I'm guessing that the green- dragon is Firnen?" â€" Firnen being the name of Saphira's mate, and Arya's dragon- partnerâ€|

Eragon nodded, though his mind seemed to be elsewhereâ€| "And just behind him areâ€| _a few_ of their offspring."

A few minutes later, Firnen came in for a landing. Than Arya unfastened the straps on Firnen's saddle, and slid down one of his forelegs. By then, Eragon was there â€" and the two of them embraced. A moment later, they separated, Firnen folded in his wings, and they and Saphira looked up â€" expectantlyâ€|

Another dragon was coming in for a landing: One of the ones that had been flying just behind Firnenâ€| When it landed, his Rider slid down from his back and stepped forward. When he reached them, Eragon clapped him on the shoulder, and turned to face the villagersâ€| They saw pride in his face, so it came as no surprise when Eragon said, "This is our son â€" Evandar, and thisâ€|" he paused, gesturing to the dragon behind him â€" whose scales had found the perfect balance between blue and green, "â€| is ****{T.B.A.}****.****

Eragon did not introduce _all_ of the Riders and Dragons, of course â€" though he did introduce several of the most senior members: The

first three Riders from each race â€" Elves, Humans, and Urgals; as well as their dragons. Arya and Firnen â€" of course, the villagers already recognized of knew of.

The space immediately surrounding the village was nowhere near big enough for all of the dragons to land. Fortunately, a fair number needed to hunt â€" so, after those with Riders had dropped them off on the island, they set- off in search of _wild- game_. The other dragons set- down in an assortment of clearings â€" around the island (â€" essentially, the first available space that was big enough for them to land and take- off from.

{Mildew â€" who hadn't visited the village since his 'encounter' with Eragon, nearly had a heart- attack when he opened his front door to see four medium- sized dragons settling- into his cabbage fields, but other than thatâ€| Everything went quite smoothly.}

A few hours laterâ€|

Once all of the Dragons and Riders (- extra emphasis on the '_wild- dragons_'), had been settled, Eragon, Saphira, Arya, Firnen, and Eragon and Saphira's six students â€" gathered in the clearing where they had come every day for the past month (- and a bit).

Their conversation ranged over a variety of topics: The Ra- Zac, the Eldunari, Galbatorix, the journey from the Riders' Stronghold to Berk, and so on. The main topic of interest to Arya, however, was Berk's relations with the dragons â€" and whether the Vikings would make good Ridersâ€| (They'd started with the other topics initially, and made their way alongâ€|)

When the conversation turned to the war between Vikings and Dragons, they could see the young- Vikings tense â€" but Hiccup told his story. Occasionally, one of the others would chime in â€" adding some thought or detail â€" but for the most part, they left the telling to Hiccupâ€|

Once he'd finished, several minutes passed in silence. Finally, Arya said, "So: Your people went from fighting your dragons, to riding themâ€|" Another pauseâ€| "It may be coincidence, but your tale very nearly parallels the story of how Our Order was founded in the first placeâ€|"

This news came as a surprise to both the Vikings, and their dragons â€" but it was Hiccup who said, "'â€|Nearly parallelsâ€|" Wait â€" You're saying that the Elves once fought with the dragons as well?"

Arya nodded â€" a little sadly, "Yesâ€| My people once fought the dragons â€" killing many, just as your people did in your warâ€| And both our wars ended in similar ways: In our case, an elf â€" named Eragonâ€| _the first_ Eragon, found a dragon- egg that had been either lost or abandoned. He raised the dragon in secret â€" befriended it, then used their friendship to bring both sides together to form a peace: From that peace, Our Order was bornâ€|

"

This was followed by yet another silence, though Hiccup had the feeling that Eragon, Arya, their dragons, and the Eldunari â€" were conversing with one another, without wordsâ€|

Finally, Eragon spoke aloud, "Then we are in agreement." Arya nodded as did both Saphira and Firnen. A wave of approval seemed to emanate from the Eldunari, from where they hovered unseen.

The Vikings waited uncertainly. Then Eragon turned to them, "We have decided that your people are worthy to join in our Pact with the Dragons. Tell your people that once we have dealt with the Ra-Zac, we will begin to make the necessary arrangements."

****Part Two "War Council****

Stoick had called his advisors to the Great Hall to discuss strategy for their attack on the Ra-Zac's Nest. Also present were Eragon, Arya, Evandar, the other Riders who Eragon had introduced, and those of their dragons that could fit through the entrance to the hall.

Because of the number of people gathered, it was obvious from the start that there would be no fitting them all around the usual meeting-table. Instead, they pushed four benches together to form a square.

Their biggest problem was discovering where the Ra-Zac's Nest was: Obviously it would be somewhere secluded, but that narrowed it down to any of the hundreds of small to medium-sized uninhabited islands that were scattered across the region.

Then Eragon asked if there were any locations that were said to be too dangerous, or even 'haunted'. The moment he had, Hiccup and Astrid jumped to their feet and, speaking in unison, said:

"Breakneck Bog!"

"But that's where the Smothering Smokebreath lives!" Fishlegs interjected nervously, "They like metal not people."

"But we found bones, when we were there," Astrid pointed out. "Plus ships never go anywhere near those islands because of the sharp-rocks."

"Exactly," Hiccup agreed. "Also, the Smothering Smokebreath takes metal-objects to melt into the outsides of their nests for protection but protection from what?" There were no signs of other dragons living there... we just assumed it was dragons because we thought it was the only possibility! Between the Smokebreath, the rocks, and the legends, nobody would bother the Ra-Zac or the Letherblaka there: Breakneck Bog would be the perfect place for them!"

Knowing they had to be sure before they moved in-force, Hiccup retrieved a serving-bowl and filled it with water, and murmured the scrying-spell.

An image of the cluster of island appeared just as they'd once seen it from dragon-back. By speaking a few more words, Hiccup manipulated the image to show different parts of the island. Nothing.

Just as Hiccup was starting to think that maybe he'd gotten it wrong,

there was a flicker of movement: A few small clusters of shadows where there shouldn't have been _any_â€| By now, Astrid, Eragon and Arya had gathered around Hiccup â€" close enough to see, but not so close that they'd cast a shadow over the imageâ€|

They saw it too: Hiccup zoomed- in with the imageâ€| There was no doubt. Grinning triumphantly, Hiccup turned to face the others, "We've got them."

Then it was only a matter of planning their attack â€" and it didn't take as long as one might have expected. They kept it simple, because, as Eragon said, "The more complicated a plan, the more things there are that could go wrong." (â€" There was no arguing with logic like that.)

The meeting came to a close, and they parted ways â€" each to prepare for the battle that was to comeâ€|

They would eradicate both the Ra- Zac and the Letherblaka â€" permanentlyâ€|

To be continuedâ€|

18. Chapter 18

Chapter Eighteen â€" Death to The Shadows

Part One â€" Departure

The Vikings of Berk rose early, the following morning â€" just as the sun was beginning to riseâ€| Most of their preparations had been completed either before The Riders had arrived â€" or by the end of that day, but there was another reason for needing an early startâ€|

The Ra- Zac had found a way to get over their one- time fear of flying over water â€" which left their aversion to bright light as their only remaining vulnerability: They **_could not _**afford to waste daylight_._

By the time the sun had risen fully, the leading edge of Berks' fleet was already several miles away from the island. It was a formidable sight â€" Just as it had been when they had set sail to destroy the Dragons' Nest; but the atmosphere was very different: Before, it was thoughts of battle, glory, and the thought of finally being free of the dragons that had energized them. Today, it was rage at how they had been manipulated and used against the dragons â€" which had never _really_ been their enemies at all, that propelled the Viking ships forwardâ€|

The Dragons and Riders did not fly with the fleet. Rather, they waited several hours â€" to give the fleet a decent head- start, than followed at a leisurely pace. After all, dragons could cover much greater distances in the time it would take the Viking Fleet to reach Breakneck Bog, and giving their enemies advance- warning was, undeniably, unwise.

Noon â€" Near Breakneck Bogâ€|

When the first of the dragons arrived at Breakneck Bog, the first thing they saw was the ring of Viking ships that surrounded the cluster of islands. Even from above, they could see the crates of crossbow- bolts " and Vikings with their crossbows close- at- hand.

The Vikings weren't particularly happy to be using crossbows " swords and axes being the preferred weapons. However, Eragon's descriptions of his own encounters with Ra- Zac made it clear to them that " if it came down to hand- to- hand combat with a Ra- Zac, they'd be worse than dead: They'd be dinner.

Instead, they and near- half of the Rider- Dragon pairs would hold the perimeter: The Vikings from the ground, the Riders and Dragons from the air. The importance of this could not be over- emphasized: If even a few Ra- Zac or Letherblaka escaped, their mission would fail, and the unholy creatures would simply go elsewhere " and stay hidden, until they were strong again.

There was no pause " no final confirmation: The fleet was in place. It was time.

The groups split- up: Those dragons who would remain in the air began to circle the islands " they and their Riders keeping their eyes peeled for the slightest flicker of movement; that might indicate either a counter- attack, or would- be escapees

The roars of an undeterminable number of dragons filled the air: As all of the wild- dragons " and a number of those with Urgal or Elven Riders " dove towards the islands below. As they drew nearer to the islands, three more dragons rose from the deck of one of the Viking ships to join them: A Night Fury, a Deadly- Nadder, and a Gronkle " their Riders on their backs

****Part Two " A Lookout****

Seconds later, a piercing wail filled the air " one that seemed to convey both dismay, and the oldest of hatreds " emanating from the very island that Hiccup and the other young- Vikings had once visited

A few seconds later, a living- nightmare rose into the air: Black wings, a black deformed- looking body " a stench that you'd half- expect to _see_ as much as smell " and a seven- foot- long beak, extending from its face " It was large, too " smaller than any of the Riders' dragons, but still

It had emerged from a concealed opening in the side of one of the cliffs, and shot after the wild- dragon that had just blasted past its hiding place

Its wail betrayed it: Mere seconds after it had revealed itself, the Letherblaka's would-be prey spun around, and breathed fire " Parts of the Letherblaka caught- fire, but before it could wail again, the wild- dragon's tail came around and collided with the Letherblaka's wing " The impact broke bone, and the Letherblaka began to lose altitude " the dragon following to make absolutely sure that his prey would never fly again

As the dragon moved on, two Rider- Dragon pairs cautiously moved- in

to check the opening that the Letherblaka had emerged fromâ€¦| A moment later, they emerged: The cave was clearâ€¦|

Eragon knew that it could mean only one thing: The Letherblaka they'd killed had been a lookout â€" and its wail, was a warningâ€¦|

****Part Three â€" Battle Is Joined****

The Riders below had come to the same conclusion, and acted as they had been instructed: The wild- dragons, and two of every three that had Riders â€" continued their attack. The rest of the Rider- Dragon pairs landed â€" quietly, and cast spells to hide themselves from viewâ€¦|

Aware that they may have only seconds, Hiccup, Astrid, and Fishlegs had begun to cast their invisibility- spells before their dragons' feet had even touched the ground: They, and those with them, would watch â€" unseen, until they found the entrances to the Letherblaka's Nestsâ€¦|

Even now, Hiccup, Astrid, Fishlegs, and their dragons could hardly believe that they'd been allowed to join the force that was attacking the nests directly. They'd each been entrusted with one of the Eldunari in Eragon's care for the duration of the battle, and these Eldunari remained in mental- contact with Eragon, but stillâ€¦| Every so often, each of them would glance back at the point of light that hovered a short distance behind them â€" that marked the place where the Heart of an Ancient Dragon hovered, unseenâ€¦| (Except for them, none of the other Vikings knew that the Hearts existed â€" much less that there were three with them at that moment: And that was how it would remainâ€¦|)

The islands below were rocky â€" each one a mountain, that rose to a single peak. Placed as they were, the islands resembled the fingers of a massive hand â€" reaching up from the depths of the oceanâ€¦|

Now â€" from a series of small openings on two of the largest islands, the Letherblaka appeared. As their numbers grew, their wailing diminished: As anger replaced fearâ€¦|

Twentyâ€¦| Fiftyâ€¦| A hundredâ€¦| At two hundred, the flow trickled to a stop, and the Letherblaka attacked.

One might think that â€" given the vastly uneven numbers, the Riders would have to either retreat or risk being overwhelmed. But any who thought that, would have been wrongâ€¦|

In the years since Eragon had assumed Vrael's mantle â€" as the Leader of The Riders, he had devoted a considerable amount of time trying to find ways to prevent such a disaster from happening again. Among the earliest of his ideas was assigning pairs of Riders a task that neither would be able to complete on their own â€" especially in cases where he saw seeds of a rivalry that could be deemed 'unhealthy' â€" or 'excessive'. â€"â€" Once their numbers again allowed it, they'd hold mock- battles with multiple Rider- Dragon pairs on each side: These teams would change every time, so one might begrudge another's particular skill- set after one 'battle', and celebrate it the next â€" when they were both on the same team.

The results of this approach had lead to a level of virtually seamless teamwork, trust, and camaraderie " among the members of the New Order. When one Rider- Dragon pair knew that another pair had their back, they'd know who it was, and " having some idea of their fighting style, would alter their own so as to best match it.

Individually, or in groups " the Letherblaka attacked, and individually or in groups they died.

Then, as the last of the first wave of Letherblaka were falling to earth " blood streaming from wounds that were clearly fatal, the second wave burst forthâ€|

â€| But this time, they weren't alone: Each one carried up to _eight_ Ra- Zac " three or four on their backs, and one in each clawed foot.

Every time they passed over or near a dragon " Rider or no, one of the Ra- Zac would try to leap onto the dragons' backâ€| Initially, it had some effect: A wild- dragon " surprised by the arrival of her unexpected passenger, jerked to one side and struck a stone outcroppingâ€|

The impact sent the Ra- Zac on her back flying into open- air, but it also broke the bone in the dragon's right- wing, and she started to lose altitudeâ€| But before she'd dropped twenty feet, another dragon had pulled up alongside her, and his Rider set- about healing her wingâ€|

Mere minutes after the bone had been mended, a flaming Letherblaka plummeted into the ocean below " still clutching four Ra- Zac who _wouldn't_ be re-joining the battle.

By now, the Vikings had joined the fray " shooting crossbow bolts into any enemy that came within range. They fired without fear of hitting their allies: Eragon himself had cast spells on the bolts that would redirect it the moment it encountered magical- defences. (More than once, it resulted in a Ra- Zac getting an arrow in the throat " as it was trying to leap onto a near- by dragonâ€|)

At one point, Eragon saw the briefest flutter in the air " next to several of the entrances to the Letherblaka's Nests. He grinned to himself: The Riders and Dragons who'd hidden themselves from sight had just gained entry to the Nestsâ€|

Saphira spoke then, projecting her words into Eragon's mind " as well as those of Arya, Evandar, and their dragons, '**It is time we joined the fight, is it not? '**

Eragon's smile widened " and he saw similar expressions on both Arya and Evandar's facesâ€| "Soon, Saphira." He replied " both with his mind, and his voice, "Very soonâ€| "

****Part Four " Into the Nestâ€|****

Once the Ra-Zac- laden- Letherblaka had taken flight, the Riders and Dragons on the ground knew that they would never get a better opportunity than this. They had long since pinpointed the nearest entrances, but knew better than to charge in " having noted the

absence of any Ra- Zac in the first wave, and knowing that the Letherblaka would not be so foolish as to commit their full strength to a single offensiveâ€|

Once the second wave had taken to the air, the dragons made their way, cautiously, towards the nearest of the entrances â€" even as the other pairs who'd landed with them approached the other entrances they'd foundâ€|

The dragons made their way into the opening nearest to them, and through a tunnelâ€| Finally, they stepped into a massive cavern â€" the ceiling of which rose high above. Even though they were invisible, it came as an enormous relief to discover that the cavern was emptyâ€|

Aware that they had no time to waste, they got to work: They stuck together, and â€" moving from nest to nest, began to make a circuit of the roomâ€|

They were almost finished, when Hiccup glimpsed the fragments of an egg â€" on a ledge above and to the right of where Astrid and Stormfly were working: One of the eggs had hatchedâ€|

Then he saw it: the Ra- Zac hatchling â€" crawling along until it was directly above Astrid's headâ€| Its limbs gathered beneath it, ready to leapâ€|

Toothless roared a warning that drowned- out Hiccup's spell, and â€" an instant later, the limb body of the Ra- Zac hatchling fell from the ledgeâ€| It landed â€" dead â€" only a few feet from Astrid's right- handâ€|

Astrid let- out a startled yelp: She, Stormfly, and the Eldunari with them had been so focused on their task, that they had been oblivious to the threat. Wide- eyed, Astrid took several deep breaths, and turned to face Hiccup; her expression one of mixed fear and gratitude, andâ€| something else: The sort of 'warm' expression he'd see in her face just before she'd punch him in the shoulderâ€| though all she said was, "Thanks."

Hiccup was about to reply, when they heard something move in one of the entrance- tunnelsâ€|

A moment later a fully- grown Letherblaka came into view â€" with three of the Ra- Zac on its backâ€| It was clear that they'd entered in a hurry, for two of the Ra- Zac's hoods had fallen back â€" and the three young- Vikings and their dragons could see them clearly: Large black- eyesâ€| a beak that must have been close to three- inches long â€" and other, hideous featuresâ€|

Their gazes took in the ruins of their home â€" and the six intruders, who'd let- go of the invisibility spell mere minutes before...

Than one of the Ra- Zac slid down from its place on the Letherblaka's back â€" and the other two made to do likewise, but the Letherblaka chattered something to them, and the other two settled back in placeâ€| The Ra- Zac who'd dismounted hesitated â€" than the Letherblaka repeated its order. Its eyes, however, were fixed on the Vikings and their dragons â€" and they burned with hateâ€|

Turning back to Hiccup and the others, the Ra- Zac who'd dismounted said, "_Youâ€¦ We remember youâ€¦ You came to this island before â€" months agoâ€¦ We should have killed you then._" The others chattered in apparent agreement â€" their eyes lingered on the Vikingsâ€¦ Hungrilyâ€¦ "_Should we get the chance again, we will not hesitate: you â€" and all your kind â€" will die slowly, and __very__ painfully._"

With that, the Ra- Zac re-mounted the Letherblaka, which let out a piercing wail â€" unlike any that had been uttered previously, and then it turned, and flew back the way it had comeâ€¦ From outside, they heard an identical wail â€" which they assumed came from the other nestâ€¦

****Part Five â€" Death to The Shadows****

Twenty minutes laterâ€¦

A series of wails that would have drowned out any that had preceded them emanated from the Letherblaka's Nests. An instant later, the Riders and Dragons who'd entered the Nests unseen emerged â€" visible, and triumphant: The nests inside had been destroyedâ€¦ The Letherblaka's eggs shattered.

The last surviving members of their race were those fighting in the battleâ€¦

As the truth of this dawned on them, the Letherblaka let out a final wail â€" one of inexpressible rage and dismayâ€¦ Then the Letherblaka snatched up any surviving Ra- Zac they could find flew for the lines of Viking ships â€" and the Riders and Dragons that circled above themâ€¦

Eragon gave the only signal of the day, and the Riders that had held-back split into two groups: An outer- ring, and an inner- ring â€" and the inner- ring began to contractâ€¦

Eragon and Saphira, Arya and Firnen, and Evandar and his dragon moved forward with the inner- ring. Eragon and Arya wanted to be absolutely certain that their old- enemies were truly gone â€" and they wanted to be part of it. And Evandar â€" who knew all about what they'd lost because of the Ra- Zac {**RECAP:** Eragon (A.K.A. "dad") had been attacked â€" and almost eaten by them â€" on several occasions; and the Ra- Zac _had__killed_ Eragon's Uncle and Father. **AND** Arya (A.K.A. "mom") had been attacked â€" and almost eaten by them â€" on several occasions.) â€" Evandar wanted to kill as many as he could â€" and this would be his only chance. (Evandar had wanted to be in one of the groups that went _inside_ the nest, but that got a firm "No" from both of his parents â€" So: that was thatâ€¦}).

It wasn't much of a battle: Many fell to the Viking's crossbow-bolts, and others were laden down with Ra- Zac (- Evandar used magic to kill several of these; moving from one to another â€" with an expression of glee typically seen on children's faces on Christmas Morningâ€¦)

After the bolts started flying, and they'd checked to ensure that the corpses in the water were truly dead, the 'inner- ring' rendezvoused with the force that had destroyed the eggs and nests.

For the next few hours, they searched the island: Looking for hidden caverns, tunnels, or anything else that could indicate evidence of another escape- routeâ€|

By the time they finished, there was no doubt in their minds: The Razac and the Letherblaka were finally â€" truly â€" extinct.

When the news reached the Viking fleet, the crews erupted into cheers and applauseâ€| Then they made to return to Berk, where The Riders would begin to make the preparations to initiate the Vikings of Berk into the Pact of The Dragon- Ridersâ€|

****_To be continuedâ€|_****

19. Chapter 19

****Chapter Nineteen â€" Preparations Begin****

****Part One â€" The Pact, and The Caretakersâ€|****

The following morning â€" In the Great Hall of Berkâ€|

The morning after their victory at the Letherblakas' Nests, the Vikings of Berk had all gathered in the Great Hall for breakfast â€" as they always did.

The news that Eragon had judged their people as being worthy to join The Riders' Pact had â€" of course, spread faster than the islands' inhabitants themselves would've thought possible. Rather than answering and re-answering the same questions over and over, Eragon had picked the next time that the majority of the villagers would be gathered in one place, and made it clear that he would not part with any information until then.

Eragon waited until he, and everyone else had finished eating â€" before getting to his feet. Once he had, the noise of conversation faded to the point that anyone entering the hall would have been surprised to find it near- fullâ€|

Much of Eragon's explanation made little sense to the majority of those listening: The extent to which the Riders' Bond 'united' the Rider and Dragon, the gradual changes that would â€" over a _extended_ periods of time â€" would occur among those who were Represented in this Pactâ€| and other things besides. Finally, Eragon told them about 'The Caretakers' â€" and of the 'tattoo' that they boreâ€|

"â€| But this is no mere design â€" inked onto their skin." Eragon continued, "It has a consciousness â€" of a sort: When given form and substance â€" through magic, it serves as The Dragons' Representative in all things related to The Pact between our Racesâ€|" Eragon paused for a moment, then added, "I have only met 'It' twice in my lifetime: The first was during the first 'Agaiti Blodren' that I attended â€" The second, when I altered the Pact to allow the Urgalgra and the Dwarves to join the ranks of The Riders."

It took Hiccup almost a full minute to find his voice, but â€" finally, he managed to say, "Youâ€| you said that it was during that

'Agaiti Blodren' that you were transformed â€" This... 'Dragon' was the 'force' that caused it to happenâ€" Wasn't it?"

Eragon inclined his head in the affirmative; "'It' knew that Saphira and I were the dragons' best chance to avoid extinction, so 'It' completed the transformation that might have taken a century or two to finish on its ownâ€" "

"â€" Galbatorix might still have killed us, but he wanted us in his service â€" and he believed Saphira to be the last female- dragon in existence: Galbatorix's greatest ambition was to resurrect The Riders under him â€" bound by unbreakable oaths to do his willâ€" And he came very close: He'd managed to get one of his remaining two eggs to hatch â€" after which he forced the new Dragon and Rider to swear loyalty to him. Later â€" When Saphira and I arrived to confront him, Arya was with usâ€" Two months later, the dragon in the third egg â€" later named Firnen, hatched for _her_: If events had gone differently, Galbatorix would have had all six of usâ€" "

For several minutes, the silence in the hall was nearly- absolute: The very idea was _terrifying_â€" "

Eragon shook his head ruefully, "But back to the topic at hand: I've already contacted The Caretakers, and sent an envoy to Ellesmera â€" to collect them, and bring them here. Their presence is essential in order to properly cast the Binding Spells. Given the distance to and from, I would expect them to return in three â€" perhaps four weeks. During that timeâ€" " Eragon turned to face his students, "We will continue your lessons where we left off â€" and there is another matter that will need to be resolvedâ€" "

****Part Two â€" A Question of Successionâ€" ****

_Later, in the usual clearingâ€" _

An hour later, Hiccup, Astrid, Fishlegs, and their dragons arrived in the clearing. As usual, Eragon and Saphira â€" who'd left the hall soon after he'd finished delivering his explanation â€" were waiting for them.

Somewhat to their surprise, Saphira and the other dragons took to the skies soon after their Riders had dismounted â€" as they had during their first few weeks of trainingâ€" "

A few minutes after the dragons had vanished from view, Hiccup asked the question that had been going through his mind since before Eragon had left the Great Hall, "Ebrithiln â€" Before you left, you said that there was 'another matter' that needed to be resolvedâ€" What was it?"

"You have a decision to make," Eragon's reply gave away nothing of what he was thinking - any more than his expression did.

Hiccup cast around with his thoughts â€" trying to figure out what Eragon was referring to, butâ€" Nothing came to mind. "What would that be, Ebrithillan?"

"Think, Hiccup: What is the single most significant change that you underwent when you and Toothless chose to join the Pact of the Riders? â€" How does the position you hold now, relate to that which

you would otherwise have assumed?"

Hiccup pondered this for several minutes, before saying, "Immortalityâ€¦ As a Rider, I'll live longer than I would have otherwise â€" But whatâ€¦" Then the final piece slid into placeâ€¦ "I get it: My dad's the chief â€" and I'm next in line. Since I won't die after a normal span of yearsâ€¦ It'll fool- up the succession."

Eragon nodded, "After I killed Galbatorix, there were many who fully-expected me to claim the crown. Nobody could have stopped me â€" had I wished to, though not everyone would have approved: As one of the Elf- Lords said, 'No immortal should hold a mortal- throne'."

Eragon paused for a moment â€" to let that sink- in, and then he continued, "Furthermore, The Riders are meant to be peace- keepers, healers, and scholars. You cannot lead your tribe, and claim to be unbiased on issues that would impact them: Appearances matter."

Astrid spoke- up, then â€" disbelief evident in her voice, "You can't seriously be suggesting that he give- up his place as the next Chief? â€" His family- line goes back for generations! â€¦" She paused â€" her face a little pink, and carefully avoiding Hiccup's eyesâ€¦

Eragon raised an eyebrow, "Considering that the next- in- line after Hiccup would be his cousin â€" Snotlout, I think that would be a poor decision. No â€" Hiccup will need to find _another_ alternative, but it is not a matter to put- off: The fact that you have formed a peace with the dragons â€" and will have joined the Pact of The Riders is not the sort of transition that will go unnoticed for long. Once it becomes common- knowledge, the most likely reaction on the part of your neighbouring- tribes will be fear â€" Especially when the _leader_ of this branch of Our Order becomes the of Chief of Berk."

Hiccup wasn't surprised to hear that Eragon would be leaving him in-charge of their branch of The Riders â€" as the two of them had discussed the possibility previously. This left his mind free to think, and it wasn't long before he came up with a plausible solutionâ€¦

He'd been silent for long enough that the others had focused on him â€" curiously. Nodding â€" as the last few details settled into place in his mind, Hiccup said, "It seems to me that the best course of action would be to make contact with the other local- tribes â€" with the exception of those we know have had hostile- intentions in the past. We let invite them to send representatives to the recitation of the Binding- Spells â€" so their people also have a chance to become Riders. As to the successionâ€¦"

Here, Astrid noticed, Hiccup's face was turning a little pink â€" and that _he_ was glancing pretty much everywhere _except_ at her. As she realized what this meant, she felt her own cheeks growing warm, againâ€¦

Hiccup paused for a moment, then continued, "As to the succession, I'll continue as before: Take my father's place as chief â€" when the time comes. However â€" when I reach the age of Berk's eldest chief

so far, I will allow my heir to take- over, and devote my full-attention to Our Order from that point on. Should any dispute arise that calls my allegiance into question prior to that, than I will act in the role of 'Chief' and use my influence as a Rider to do no more than ensure that negotiations remain peaceful. I'll swear whatever oaths the situation makes necessary," Hiccup paused grinning, "And I'll be sure to phrase them so they don't get me into trouble later."

A moment of silence greeted Hiccup's words, and then Eragon nodded in approval, and said, "Well thought- out, Hiccup: A tidy solution, indeed." Astrid and Fishlegs also looked impressed.

"We will leave the topic there, for now. For the next two- hours, the three of you are to continue with your meditations: See what progress you can make with the advice you received from the 'Eldunari.'" Turning to Hiccup, Eragon added, "This evening, we will discuss the matter with your father and see if he has anything to add."

Hiccup, Astrid, and Fishlegs inclined their heads, "Yes, Ebrithiln." Then they separated, and made their way to their respective clearings

****Part Three The Voices of the Forest****

The first clearing

Before opening his mind, Hiccup reviewed the tips and suggestions that the 'Eldunari' had shared: 'don't think about what is around you: clear your mind of all thought' 'do not be 'one' of anything: be all of everything' He cleared his mind, than lowered the barriers around his mind

The second clearing

Astrid had to spend the first five minutes doing simple breathing-exercises, in order to slow her heartbeat a constant thumping that reminded her of Viking war- drum sounding the attack

Finally, she too, reviewed the pointers given to her by the 'Eldunari', and opened her mind

The third (and 'newest') clearing

For the first quarter of an hour, Fishlegs struggled to clear his mind That had always been the hardest part, for him: Random facts seemed to keep popping up

But finally, he was able to quiet his thoughts and he opened his mind

The Voices Of The Forest

As each of the young- Riders opened their minds, they were amazed by what they not 'saw' 'Sensed'

Each of them sensed all of the things that they'd sensed before, but it was as though they'd been listening to a music that was

__supposed__ to be played by __multiple__ instruments, but that was
â€" until that moment â€" only being played with __one__â€" |__

_The earth itself wasâ€" | alive: Insects deep below the surface â€" in
the trees â€" on the leaves of bushesâ€" | But there was more â€" much
more than that: They could sense the trees themselvesâ€" | The
bushesâ€" | The grass. Even the patches of earth that appeared desolate
to the eye was teeming with lifeâ€" |__

They could tell when their two- hours were up: Not because of the
suns' position in the sky, but by the 'knowledge' they gleaned from
the minds of the small- animals around themâ€" |

{Somewhat to their surprise, many of the smaller creatures had a
surprisingly keen awareness of how much daylight remained. â€" Upon
reflection, however, it made more sense: Knowing that 'other' animals
would come out to hunt once the sun went down _would_ serve as a good
motivator to be back in their dens before thenâ€" |}

Part Four â€" A Dangerous Secretâ€" |

_Two hours laterâ€" |__

When the three of them returned to the main clearing, they took turns
explaining the things that they'd sensed â€" keeping their
descriptions as brief as possibleâ€" |

Eragon â€" they could tell, was impressed. "Well done â€" all of
you." He got to his feet, and continued, "By all the standards of Our
Order, you have just graduated from your apprenticeships â€" and have
proven yourselves worthy of the same rights and privileges as an
Elder of Our Order."

Hiccup, Astrid and Fishlegs simply stood there â€" stunned by what
they had just heardâ€" |

"And as such," Eragon continued, "You have earned the right to be
entrusted with one of the greatest secrets of magic... â€"
Astridâ€" |"

Jolted from her reverie, Astrid answered, "Yes,
Ebrithiln?"

Gesturing to a nearby tree, Eragon said, "Set that tree on fire:
Speak the spell aloud, but use only the energy you can draw from the
world around you."

A little surprised, Astrid reached out with her mind â€" drawing from
the world around her, and said, "Brisingr!" â€" Blue flames curled
around the branches of the tree, though they didn't burnâ€" | Unlike
the other times she'd cast magic, her own supply of energy remained
untouchedâ€" |

Then she sensed something terrible moving through the earth around
her, and glanced down: She stood in the middle of a circle of dying
grass â€" which grayed and crumbled to dust, even as she watchedâ€" |
Then she realized that it was the demands of _her own spell_ that she
was witnessing â€" and she immediately ended the spellâ€" | allowing
the flames to dieâ€" |

The grass stopped crumblingâ€|

Astrid looked at Eragon in horror, but it was Hiccup who said, "Howâ€| How is that possible?"

"You already knowâ€| â€" all of you doâ€| Each of you have borrowed energy from your dragons before, and this facet of magic operates on a similar principal."

Again, it was Hiccup who spoke, "We can draw power from our dragons because of our bond â€" and because they have the energy to spareâ€| In order for us to do this with someone â€" or something else, we'd have toâ€| we'd have toâ€|" His sentence drifted to silence, and his face paledâ€|

Eragon finished the sentence, "You would have to enter the mind â€" or minds â€" of whoever was going to supply the energy: Through your meditations â€" and in addition to the other skills you have picked-up, you have proven to yourselves that this can be done. However, if you are disciplined, you can choose to draw the energy only from those who can afford to spare it. While I'm sure you can see why this knowledge is not shared with theâ€| 'Untested', it has many practical uses: More than once, I have prevented what would have been a massacre simply by making the would- be murderers too tired to wield their weapons â€" Those being cases when I did not wish to publically reveal my presence."

From there, the topics of discussion ranged until â€" at last, they could sense the minds of their dragons again drawing nearer. When the four of them landed, the Riders remounted, and the dragons again took to the air.

They would continue their lessons the following morning, because â€" apparently, they "still had much to learn"â€|

To be continuedâ€|

20. Chapter 20

Chapter Twenty â€" The Pact of The Dragon Riders

Part One â€" The Invitations

When they brought Hiccup's proposal before Stoick, the Chief's reaction was one of mixed surprise, and pride at how easily Hiccup had found a suitable and workable solution to the problem that Eragon had presented. (He even admitted that the problem had occurred to him â€" when he thought about how he himself would have felt, had such a transfer of power been about to occur elsewhereâ€|)

Stoick could think of nothing to add to Hiccup's proposal, so the conversation quickly turned to how best to execute it. (By the time they had finished their meeting, it was decided that Stoick would write- up a letter for each chief of their neighbouring tribes â€" a brief note, detailing the generalized particulars, how he had agreed to them, and inviting each of them to send representatives to Berk in three weeks time â€" in order for their respective tribes to be represented.) Then, Eragon, Saphira, and their students would journey, together, to deliver these to the other chiefs â€" as well

as answer any questions they 'might' have.

The following morningâ€|

By noon of the following day, Stoick had finished the six copies of their letters, and they were ready to go. The other villagers gathered to see them off â€" aware that it could be as long as a week before they would returnâ€|

The Riders and their Dragons spent the better part of that week â€" and several days of the next, travelling to the homes of the other tribes and chiefs nearest to Berk.

Each time they stopped, they explained first how Berk had made peace with '_their_' dragons, than how Hiccup had met Eragon â€" who had first trained them, then had offered to accept the Vikings into the Pact of The Ridersâ€|

Every time they finished â€" in each of the locations they visited, each of The Riders glimpsed the momentary flicker of fear in the (respective) Chief's eyes. At which point, Hiccup had explained how he would be relinquishing his future- place as Chief of Berk â€" once he had reached the age of Berks' eldest Chief to date â€" as well as the other particulars of the arrangement. (The young- Riders had been a little surprised to see the level of fear in the eyes of the other Chiefs â€" considering how little they were being told, compared to what _they themselves_ had been taughtâ€|)

By the time they left each village, however, they had noticed the level of tension drop considerably â€" replaced by a combination of awe and excitement. As they rose into the air, they would glance back, and see men and women â€" advisors to their chief, streaming off in all directions to spread the newsâ€|

****Part Two â€" A Riders' Sword****

Once they had finally returned to Berk â€" and, after answering what seemed to be hundreds of questions about their trip â€" they made it back to the clearing where they had presented themselves for over a month now.

Somewhat to the surprise of Hiccup, Astrid, Fishlegs, and their dragons, three packages sat in the center of the space where the four of them would always sitâ€| Three packages that â€" though wrapped, were clearly swordsâ€|

Eragon â€" however, merely smiled, "Good: It seems that Rhunon finished her work earlier than we'd expected." As he spoke, he picked up the bundles, and turned back to face themâ€|

Hiccup blinked, "Isn't Rhunon the name of the Elvin smith who helped you forge your sword?"

Eragon nodded, "As you recall, I have been present at nearly all of your sparring sessions â€" observing your respective styles and techniques. I contacted her two weeks ago â€" both to relay the information I had gathered, and to give her enough time to work." He paused, then â€" to hand Hiccup, Astrid, and Fishlegs one of the bundlesâ€| "It is â€" after all, a tradition in Our Order for a student to receive a sword of their own, once they have completed

their apprenticeships."

A feeling of awe and understanding gripped Hiccup, and he began to unwrap his bundle. As the cloth fell away, the sword became visible: The blade and hilt was pitch-black the same color as Toothless's scales and it radiated the same sense of deadly-purpose as did Eragon's own sword. The only difference was that it also bore the Crest of Berk as well as the space that waited to receive the glyph that would correspond to the Name given to the blade. Inset into the pommel of the sword, was a black-opal that was only slightly smaller than a chicken's egg.

Astrid was next to unwrap her sword. In appearance, it closely resembled Hiccup's only Astrid's matched the varying shades of blue one would find on Stormfly's scales. Inset into the pommel of her sword was a blue opal as clear as water, only darker.

Fishlegs was last to unwrap his sword and he did so a little nervously: Meatlug was a brownish-dragon, and brown was not commonly a color used in ornamenting weapons. The moment the cloth fell-away, however, his feelings of trepidation vanished: It was as though all of the most complimentary shades of brown had been gathered and interwoven onto the blade... It still matched Meatlug's scales, though it was also a work of art on its own.

There was something else about these swords: The moment Hiccup, Astrid, and Fishlegs grasped their respective hilts, the blades felt as though they belonged there. They were perfectly balanced as perfectly suited to them.

It took several minutes for her to form words, but finally, Astrid turned to Eragon, "Thank-you, Ebrithiln." Hiccup and Fishlegs seemed to come out of a daze then, and they added their own thanks.

Eragon raised an eyebrow, "Don't thank me. Thank Her." As he spoke, he gestured with one hand, and though he said no words in the Ancient Language, the air to Eragon's left began to ripple.

A moment later, the image of an elf one who looked older than any that the young-Riders or their Dragons had ever seen, came into view. Then, stepping into view of the elven-women, Eragon said, "Atra esterni ono thelduin, Rhunon-Elda."

Their conversation was not overly long: Hiccup, Astrid, and Fishlegs took turns to thank Rhunon for her gift, and to marvel at her craftsmanship. Rhunon who'd initially appeared annoyed by the interruption, was soon in a good-humour: After all, what artist would not like to hear their work being praised?

Soon after, however, Eragon brought their 'visit' to a close, and ended his spell: It was time for them to return to the Great Hall for supper.

****Part Three The Envoys****

The envoys from the other tribes began to arrive in the morning the day before The Caretakers were expected to reach Berk.

There were six boats in total one from each of the tribes that

had been invited. Each boat carried twelve men â€" eight guards/sailors, and four others â€" at least two of whom were related to the chief of their tribe, in one way or another.

Unlike other such occasions in the past, there were no scuffles â€" not even the smallest of quarrels: The feeling of mounting anticipation simply would not allow such thingsâ€|

The new- arrivals were put- up in the village, and â€" once again, they settled down to await the much- anticipated arrival of The Caretakersâ€|

****Part Four â€" The Binding Spells****

The Caretakers arrived the following day â€" in the early afternoon.

The moment they left the ground, they made their way directly to the village square â€" The largest open space that was available to themâ€|

Everyone who could fit into the space not marked- out as reserved for the Recitation was packed: The delegations from the other tribes, the people of Berk: All were crammed together in the hopes of getting the best view possibleâ€|

The Caretakers walked into the center of the square, and â€" without pomp or ceremony, they let their robes fall awayâ€| Underneath, they were clad only in the tattoo that Eragon had describedâ€| The Caretakers positioned themselves so that the tattoo carried- on â€" uninterrupted from the limb and torso of one, to that of the otherâ€|

Then â€" as The Riders who had answered Eragon's summons began to sing in the Ancient Languageâ€| the two Elvin Caretakers began to danceâ€|

The pace of the song and dance built â€" and continued to build until sweat streamed from the two elvesâ€| Then â€" suddenly, they frozeâ€| as the face of the tattooed- dragon â€" on the chest of one of the elves opened its eyesâ€|

Thenâ€| slowly, the 'tattoo' of the dragon lifted itself free from its Elvin hosts, and rose into the skyâ€| A moment later, it unleashed a roar that echoed throughout the village â€" and out over the ocean beyondâ€|

Then Eragon stepped forward, and â€" speaking in the Ancient Language, he called to the dragonâ€|

The massive, multi- coloured dragon brought 'It's' attention to bear on Eragon, who â€" still speaking in the Ancient Language, proceeded to tell the dragon what he wanted to doâ€|

Then the 'dragon' spoke â€" 'It's' voice echoing through the minds of those watchingâ€| *****_Two thousand years ago, you killed Galbatorix â€" who was, perhaps, Our Greatest Enemy. Then you asked me to alter Our original Pact â€" to allow the Urgalgra and the Dwarves to become part of itâ€| You said this would strengthen Our Order as nothing else could â€" and you have delivered on your**

promise: The stone beneath our claws â€" and the wind beneath our wings, is stronger now than it had ever been. You have earned Our Trust, Eragon.'_** â€"â€" The dragon paused for several minutesâ€| examining those before him. Finally, his eyes landed on Toothless â€" and the other dragons standing around himâ€| **'****_And now you reunite us with kin we never knew we had...'_** The 'dragon' was silent for several more moments, than it dipped its head in a slow nod, **'****_Do as you will 'King-killer' â€" We do not object.'_**

Then the dragon simply hovered there â€" silently observing, as Eragon began to speak in the Ancient Language: First, he silently invoked the _Name of All Names_, then he continued to speak in the Language of Magic â€" Re-forging the Ancient Pact, and binding the Vikings represented there â€" to it as wellâ€|

As he spoke the last phrase â€" word, and then syllable, the 'dragon' began to glowâ€| When the glow faded, a chorus of gasps rose from the crownâ€| The 'dragon' had changed: It now bore an additional tail-fin â€" like the Night- Furiesâ€| The spikes along its back now resembled those of a Deadly- Nadder, and other subtle changes had occurredâ€|

There could be no doubt as to what this meant: The Binding Ceremony had served its purpose.

The Vikings had joined The Pact of the Dragon- Ridersâ€|

To be continuedâ€| (?)

21. Chapter 21

Chapter Twenty- One â€" The Riders of The North

Part One â€" Celebration

Two hours after the Binding Ceremony had concluded, the inhabitants of Berk, the representatives from the other tribes, and a number of the more senior- Riders, had packed into the Great Hall â€" to commemorate the occasion with a feast.

Aware that the majority of the Riders did not partake of meat, the inhabitants of Berk had made a point of providing a selection of other foods: Wheels of goat- cheese, a selection of fruits and vegetables, and freshly- baked loaves of bread, and other baked-goodsâ€|

The beer had also been watered- down, a little â€" to help prevent any 'scuffles'. (The concern being that someone would get drunk, andâ€| 'Offend' one of the Elvin- women â€" who'd been drawing a great many glances from the male- population of Berk, since their arrival.) â€" This had caused some grumbling, though they all knew that it was a valid concern.

After the Binding Ceremony, however, everyone was so absorbed in the conversation; they could have been drinking goats' milk â€" normally given to infants and small- children, and not noticedâ€|

The celebration lasted well into the evening, and was still going

strong when Hiccup, Astrid, and Fishlegs excused themselves. Accompanied by their dragons, they made their way down the steps that descended into the village " talking as they went.

****Part Two " Plans for the Future ** {T.B.A.}**

The following morning, most of the Riders and Dragons who'd answered Eragon's call prepared to return to their Island Stronghold. By midmorning, they were ready to go: Arya and Evandar said their farewells, and mounted their respective dragons. Then they " and those with them, took to the skies...

Eragon would remain on Berk, for a while yet " both to finish instructing his newest pupils, and help establish The Riders' presence in the North.

_An hour after noon" | _

It was early afternoon when Eragon, Saphira, and their students arrived at their usual clearing.

For the next few hours, Eragon taught them the spells that would need to be placed on those eggs that the wild- dragons entrusted to The Riders " explaining the purpose and function, as he went. (It was hard work " as the spells were as lengthy and complicated as you might expect.)

By the time Eragon had finished describing the process, Astrid's head was pounding, and Fishlegs didn't look much better. Hiccup, however, wore the same expression as he would if he'd been hard at work on one of his projects " As he _continued_ to process the new information"

Astrid rubbed her forehead, and " noticing this, Eragon added, "It's a lot to take in, I know, but you don't have to memorize all of it: I've made arrangements for a selection of books from our Great Library to be copied- out, and for the copies to be sent here"

"In the meantime, we should make a point of selecting an appropriate location for a new stronghold" Perhaps even to begin construction " so that it will be ready when it is needed." Eragon spoke as though he'd never broken from his initial train- of- thought.

The rest of the afternoon passed as they discussed possible locations. (As it happened, there were a number of fair- sized islands within easy flying distance")

When they finally did return to Berk, they ate a quick supper, and turned- in for the night.

Eragon had given them the rest of the week to 'pursue their own interests', or relax " as they would"

****Part Three " True Names"**

_Hiccup" | _

The following morning, Hiccup awoke early " though not unusually so. With a flicker of thought, he woke Toothless " who, Hiccup

could tell â€" was fully- rested, and merely dozingâ€|

He'd thought long and hard about where would be the best placeâ€| Where could he go to get as close to 'himself'? â€" An instant later, he knew. He leapt onto Toothless's back, and the Night- Fury set-offâ€| Bound for the place where the two of them had first met: The Coveâ€|

Astridâ€|

Astrid woke- up almost an hour later than Hiccup, though she was thinking along much the same lines. The answer came to her almost as quickly: The Cliffsideâ€| Overlooking the ocean â€" Where she would sometimes 'chance' across Hiccupâ€| '_Not that that had anything to do with it, though_', she told herself.

_Hiccup_â€|

It was still dark when Hiccup and Toothless reached the cove â€" and it would be for another half- hour, or soâ€|

Hiccup sat on a small, flat boulder â€" opened his mind, and retreated from the outer- worldâ€| Meanwhile, Toothless curled up on a rock, and 'dozed- off'.

Astridâ€|

Astrid settled down on a patch of grass, a short distance away from the edge of the cliff edge. Next to her, Stormfly settled into the grass. Unlike Astrid, Stormfly had decided not to seek- out her true- name, though she was happy to keep her Rider company, and help if she couldâ€|

Hiccupâ€|

Hiccup wasn't having much luck, so farâ€|

He thought back to when he met Toothless â€" The moment that he'd looked what he'd once thought to be a legendary- monster in the eyeâ€|

Then a new thought occurred to him, and something clicked: He'd been thinking of himself as _he had been_ â€" before he'd met Toothlessâ€| When he'd wanted nothing more than to earn the respect of his father, and his tribe.

He _had_ those things, now, but the change had been indirect: It had come from _outside_ of himselfâ€| Not inside â€" Where he had been lookingâ€|

He made the necessary changes to one of his earlier attempts, and a current of energy rushed of energy rushed through him â€" followed by a wave of understanding: He knew who he was, and he was content with the knowledge â€" and with the knowledge that he could improve on itâ€|

_Astrid_â€|

Astrid was starting to get annoyed. She wasn't always the most patient person â€" Fine: She could accept thatâ€| Determined: CHECK.

Resourceful: CHECK (- '_Even Hiccup said soâ€|_' â€" The thought sent a shiver of pride through her, but she ignored it). Skilled warrior: CHECKâ€|

But she still seemed to be missing somethingâ€| She reviewed what Eragon had told them about a person or things' True- Name: _'â€| You have to include everything about the person or thing you're trying to nameâ€|_'

***_You know what's missing, '_** Stormfly interjected,
_ '_**_Him_****_...'_**

'_No â€" It has nothing to do withâ€| with Hiccup...'_ Even as she spoke, Astrid was forcing herself to believe it.

***_Are you worried about how he might react? â€| Or do you not want to risk changing the way things are, now? â€" Why else would you deny what you feel? '_**

'_What â€" I'm â€" No! '_ Even as she spoke, Stormfly's questions seemed to strike a chord inside of herâ€|

Then include it in your last attempt, and try again. â€" Why let these idle- worries get the best of you?*' **Then Stormfly sent a stream of images across their link â€" from their lesson yesterday, and the day before: Images of Astrid and/ or Hiccup blushing at 'key-points' of the lessonsâ€|

Then Stormfly spoke again, ***_Humour me_****.'**

Reluctantly, Astrid made the necessary change to her most recent attempt, and repeated the name, in her mindâ€|

An instant later, a current of energy flowed through her â€" followed by a rush of comprehensionâ€| Of self- awareness...

She knew who she was, and what had held her back: Astrid knew who she wasâ€|

***_To be continuedâ€|_**

22. Chapter 22

***Chapter Twenty- Two â€" An Island Stronghold: The Unclaimed Island**

***Part One â€" An Exchange of Namesâ€|**

Several days laterâ€|

Ever since Astrid had discovered her true name, a thought had been nagging at her: It was both exhilarating and terrifying, but it also feltâ€| 'Right'.

On the morning of the third day following her discovery, Astrid climbed onto Stormfly's back. Once she was settled, Stormfly rose into the sky, and angled in the direction of the cove. (The cove, they knew, was one of Hiccup's favourite places to meditate â€" so it seemed the likeliest place to find him...)

They arrived to find Hiccup sitting cross- legged â€" his eyes closed, and Toothless curled- up near- byâ€|

Astrid felt the familiar wave of awkwardness â€" accompanied by an urge to climb back onto Stormfly's back, and flyâ€| She suppressed the first, and ignored the second: She knew the truth now, and she was determined to finish what she'd startedâ€|

Hiccup opened his eyes a moment later, and got to his feet â€" smiling, "Astrid, Stormflyâ€| This is an unexpected surprise! What brings the two of you here?" He noticed Astrid's expression, and added, "Astridâ€| Are you ok?"

Astrid nodded, "I've been doing a lot thinking, over the past few daysâ€| Trying to discover my True- Nameâ€| "

Hiccup looked surprised, but said, "Are youâ€| having any luck?" He soundedâ€| hesitant â€" obviously not wanting to pry into such a personal topic.

Astrid nodded, and â€" speaking in the Ancient- Language, said, "_I found it... three days ago, nowâ€| Andâ€| And I'd like to tell it to you â€" if you would hear it._" As she spoke â€" and with some effort, she forced herself to look Hiccup in the eyeâ€|

Hiccup's eyes widened. Then, also speaking in the Ancient- Language, he said, "_If you are sure, thenâ€| I would be honoured to hear it_."

Her heart thumping, Astrid nodded, and crossed the remaining distance between them. Remembering what Eragon had told them about the importance of guarding one's True- Name, Astrid brought her lips to Hiccup's ear, and â€" speaking in the lowest of whispers, she told him her Name...

Hiccup was silent for almost a minute as he processed the name, though it felt like an eternity to Astridâ€| Her True- Name incorporated all that she was: Beliefs, deeds, accomplishments, failures, opinions, fearsâ€| and feelings. Now Hiccup would knowâ€|

Then Hiccup turned to look her in the eye, and â€" still speaking in the Ancient- Language, said, "_You have a name to be proud of, Astrid._" As he spoke, Astrid saw both respect, andâ€| something else in his eyes. Then Hiccup continued to speak, "_You have told me your Nameâ€| Now I would tell you mine â€" if you would hear it._"

It took Astrid a moment to process what Hiccup had saidâ€| Once she had, it took another moment to convince herself that she'd heard him correctly: The height of her hopes had been that he would hear and 'accept' her nameâ€| but for him to offer to tell her his in return?

She managed to nod, and Hiccup moved forward, brought his mouth to her ear â€" as she had, and told her his nameâ€|

The moment the words settled into place in her mind, Astrid gasped aloud...

Parts of Hiccup's name she already knew â€" just as, she was sure, Hiccup would have already known parts of hers. They had a lot in common, too: They could relate on an intellectual level, and had common ideas as to what was important in life. Their respective strengths and weaknesses seemed to both balance and complimented those of the otherâ€|

That was not what had caught Astrid's attention, howeverâ€|

It was the awareness that Hiccup cared as deeply about herâ€| as much as she did about him, and that they had both kept silent for much the same reason: Neither of them was quite sure how to 'deal with' their feelings. This uncertainty made them feel awkward, which only made it harder for them to figure it all out...

Hiccup grinned at her, and â€" speaking in their native language, said, "No wonder we make such a good team." Astrid smiled as well: All trace of uncertainty and awkwardness gone â€" as though it had never even existed...

****Part Two â€" The Unclaimed Island****

_Three days later_â€|

Three days later, Eragon, Hiccup, Astrid, Fishlegs, Stoick, and their dragons (â€" except for Saphira), were gathered in the Great Hall.

The topic they had gathered to discuss: Possible locations to establish a new stronghold for The Riders of The North. A large map depicting the region lay open on the table â€" the corners weighed down, to prevent the scroll from rolling closed while they talkedâ€|

They were well into the second hour of their meeting, when Eragon gestured to a large island that Stoick had skipped- over, and said, "I may be mistaken, but I believe this island is also uninhabited..."

"It is," Stoick admitted, "Much of the outer- part is sheer- cliff; the lowest being several hundred feet above sea- level. â€" There are only four sites where boats can safely make landfallâ€|" Noticing Eragon's thoughtful expression, Stoick added, "Once it was mapped â€" soon after our ancestors first settled in this region, the island was declared to be the largest and most defensible of all the islandsâ€| None of the tribes felt safe in allowing another to lay claim to it... It might have come to warâ€| Would have, but the Chiefs of each tribe were able to forge a treaty: If any one tribe _ever_ attempted to lay- claim to it, the others would combine forces, and drive them out before they could fully- establish themselves there. The only times when any could venture there would be on joint- expeditions â€" during our war with the dragons..."

Eragon's thoughtful expression remained, "All the more reason for The Riders to claim it." Before Stoick could open his mouth to say more, Eragon continued, "You said that '_if any one tribe_' were to claim it, then the others would turn against them, but â€" Now that all but one of the tribes; 'The Berserkers'â€| Two, if you count the 'Outcasts' as a tribe â€" have joined Our Pact, The Riders of The North_will_not_be of any one tribe. Alsoâ€|" Eragon paused for

emphasis, "â€| If The Riders hold this island- fortress, who would be fool enough to try to take it from them?"

Nobody spoke for several minutes, though several of the others appeared uneasyâ€| (They all saw Eragon's point, but still...)

Interpreting their silence correctly, Eragon added, "I am not implying that 'you' would claim this island in your own name: I am suggesting that we bring the possibility before the other chiefs; making it clear to them that it would be for the exclusive use of The Riders â€" at the Home of this branch of Our Order. If they agree, then members of all tribes could contribute to the project; in the form of resources, craftspeople, and the other skills that would be required."

This seemed to reassure the rest of their gathering, and plans were quickly made to visit the chiefs of the other tribes. â€"â€" Somewhat to their surprise, Eragon announced that he would not be going on this second series of visitsâ€|

When asked for an explanation, Eragon turned to Hiccup, "You will be the Leader of this branch of The Riders, so these decisions are ultimately yours to make. If I continue to accompany you, the other Chiefs will expect the final word to be mine: That is no longer be the case." Eragon allowed the silence that followed to last for almost a full minute, then he added, "I would suggest that the two of youâ€|" As he spoke, Eragon nodded to Hiccup and Astrid, "â€| make this round of visitsâ€|" Eragon then turned to Stoick, "â€| carrying a document that details the suggested terms, to be signed by the chiefs â€" if they find them agreeable. If they don't â€" though I believe they will, we can continue this conversation from there."

Once each the others had voiced their agreement, Hiccup produced paper and ink, and drafted the list of terms â€" adding each to the list only after it had been suggested, discussed, re-worded - if need be, and agreed upon...

When they finally left the Great Hall, the sun was beginning to set. Hiccup and Astrid were the first to leave, knowing they'd need their rest if they were going to leave the following morning â€" as they'd planned. (Simply by looking at them, one could tell that they were looking forward to the trip.)

They parted ways at the base of the stairs to the Great Hall â€" each bound for their own homes.

****_To be continuedâ€|_****

23. Chapter 23

****Chapter Twenty- Three â€" An Island Stronghold: Dragon-Stone Island****

****Part One â€" Claiming 'The Forbidden Island'****

Hiccup and Astrid left Berk for their latest round of visits to the neighbouring tribes early, the following morning.

Their first stop would be the Shivering Shores tribe. It wasn't â€" strictly speaking, the _nearest_ tribe to Berk, but it was strong, wealthy, and highly- regarded: The support of their Chief would go a long way towards what they hoped to accomplishâ€|

The weather was perfect for flying, and â€" while they made reasonably good time, they didn't push themselves: Hiccup and Astrid had always enjoyed flying together, and â€" since they had shared their True- Names, a new and much stronger bond had begun to form between them.

Their conversation came easily, and â€" knowing that they were far from prying ears, was far more open than what they would've risked back on Berkâ€|

Hours passed, though they barely noticed the passing timeâ€| In fact, it came as a surprise to both of them when the sun began to set.

That nightâ€|

They stopped for the night on a small island, less than an hours' flight from their first destination. The four of them discussed their plans over a supper of fish, bread, and fresh spring- water â€" from a stream that flowed a short distance from their camp.

After they'd eaten, Hiccup cast several of the wards that Eragon had taught them â€" to inform them if anyone was approaching their campsite, and to provide a reasonable level of protection.

Then they both unrolled the blankets they'd brought with them, and settled next to their respective dragons â€" on opposite sides of the campfireâ€|

The following morning...

Hiccup and Astrid waited until midmorning to break- camp. Once they had, it was only a short flight to the home of the Chief of the Shivering Shores Tribe.

They arrived shortly before noon. Considering the spontaneous nature of their visit, both Hiccup and Astrid fully expected that it would take some time before they would be able to meet the Chief of the Shivering Shores.

It came as a surprise when, mere minutes after they'd requested an audience, the man who'd delivered their request returned â€" with the news that the chief would see them now. (The chief â€" he explained, _had_ been settling a dispute, but news of their arrival was of such interest to those involved, that they'd agreed to resume their previous discussion at a later time.)

Once the new arrivals had seated themselves â€" having paid their respects to their hosts, Hiccup and Astrid spent the next quarter of an hour answering questions: About the binding- ceremony, how future- Riders would be chosen, andâ€| finally, where the Riders of The North intended to establish themselves.

In the case of the binding- ceremony, they mostly wanted to know if

the tales they'd heard from their representatives were true " and if Hiccup or Astrid could fill- in any more details about what had happened.

Astrid answered the second question: She explained that they still needed to gather a selection of dragon- eggs, and place the spells on them that would allow them to hatch for, and bond with, their chosen Rider. "Once we've done that," she continued, "We'll arrange times to visit each tribe, and those who wish to can present themselves to the eggs: If an egg hatches, the new Rider will begin their education."

When the third question was asked, Hiccup smiled " amused, "As it so happens, that is the subject we came to discuss" As he spoke, Hiccup produced two scrolls from his satchel; the first was a map, and the second the list of suggested- terms.

When the listeners in the room first heard that the 'proposed location' for the Riders' stronghold was the Forbidden Island, both Hiccup and Astrid felt the others in the room grow tense. Astrid shifted in her chair, but Hiccup continued to speak " calm as ever, as he continued to speak

Gradually " as Hiccup filled- in the details, and the listeners grasped the full implications of the proposal, the tension began to dissipate

When Hiccup had finished his description, he concluded by saying, "This is a proposal only, of course: Should you " or any of the other chiefs, have any concerns with the idea, they will either be addressed to the satisfaction of whoever raised them, or another location suitable location found."

The moment Hiccup had uttered these words; all lingering traces of tension were snuffed out. The silence that greeted the end of Hiccup's speech, soon replaced by a low muttering " as the various advisors conferred with their chief

It didn't take long for the Chief to come to a decision. After perhaps five minutes of discussion " during which Hiccup, Astrid, and their dragons waited outside, they were called back inside

The Chief of The Shivering Shores eyed Hiccup thoughtfully, as the latter took his seat. Then " in his gruff voice, he said, "So: You said The Riders' are peace- keepers, yes?" It wasn't really a question, but Hiccup nodded. The other man snorted, "Well, you don't waste much time, do you?" As he spoke, he gestured for the paper with one hand, while he dipped a quill into an ink- pot with the other

Shortly

An hour later, Hiccup and Astrid were remounting their dragons " the ink from the first of the signatures they needed to obtain drying on Hiccup's scroll

After their meeting had concluded, their hosts insisted that they stay for lunch " and they didn't scrimp. Both Toothless and Stormfly ate their fill. Then " when their hosts made to bring more

over, Toothless stopped them, saying, *******_I appreciate the offer, but if I eat much more, I'm not going to be able to fly._*****'** ****(It took several minutes for the resulting laughter to fade back into normal conversation.)**

After they'd risen out of hearing- distance, Astrid turned to Hiccup, "Wowâ€| One down! I've got to admit: I wasn't sure they'd go for it!"

Hiccup smiled, "It's not a sure- thing yet, but it's definitely a good start!"

_Seven days after their departure_â€|

Hiccup and Astrid returned to Berk on the morning of the seventh day following their departure. As with the journey out, they kept to a leisurely pace: There was no great hurry, after allâ€|

****Part Two â€" The 'Forbidden' Island****

_The following morning_â€|

The morning after Hiccup and Astrid had returned to Berk, they, Eragon and Saphira, and Fishlegs and Meatlug, set- out to 'The Island' that would be the Home of the Riders of the North.

The moment their dragons' claws touched the ground, a feeling came over both the young- Riders, and their dragonsâ€| It felt as though this island had been waiting for them: They knew â€" beyond a doubt, that they were in the right placeâ€|

It quickly became clear that they would not want for building materials: The ban on settling this island extended to the point that not so much as a single block of stone had been quarried from the islandâ€|

There were wide-open clearings â€" large and plentiful enough that it would be years before even a single cluster of trees would need to be clearedâ€| There were glittering blue lakes â€" filled with fish...

Astrid was the first to find her voice, "Thisâ€| This is incredible." Hiccup and Fishlegs simply nodded their agreement.

They spent several hours exploring the island, before returning to the beach where they'd first landedâ€| The eight of them gathered in front of large spire of rock â€" perhaps thirty feet tall, that sat at the top of a grassy moundâ€|

The mound was, perhaps, two- hundred feet from the nearest beach, and within view â€" from the other side, of the largest and most suitable clearings for buildingâ€|

Others might simply cut it into blocks and use it for building something elsewhere, but that seemedâ€| Wrong: As though each of them â€" Riders and Dragons alike, somehow knew it was meant for something elseâ€|

"What should we call it? â€| This island?" Astrid asked â€" having just thought of the question, herself.

This was followed by several moments of silence, as Hiccup, Fishlegs, and their dragons pondered the question. Eragon and Saphira watched the six of them in silence, as they thoughtâ€¦

It was some time before the idea occurred to Hiccup. Once it had, he somehow knew that it was the right one: He conferred with Toothless, as well as with several of the Eldunari â€" without whom he knew the task he was considering would be impossibleâ€¦

They agreed to help, and Hiccup thought he saw approval in Eragon's expression.

Hiccup took two steps forward â€" toward the stone, and released his spell: moulding the spire into the shape he desiredâ€¦

Several minutes later, Hiccup finished the spell: Where the spire had been, there was now a sculptureâ€¦ A statue: Of the dragon that represented its race, as it had appeared once the Vikings had been accepted into The Pact of The Ridersâ€¦

Turning to face his friends, Hiccup said, "Dragon-Stoneâ€¦ This is Dragon-Stone Island."

To be continuedâ€¦

24. Chapter 24

Chapter Twenty- Four â€" The New Order

Part One â€" Council of Chiefs: Plans and Offers

_One week later_â€¦

One week after the Riders and Dragons had returned from their initial exploration of Dragon-Stone Island, the Chiefs of each tribe gathered on Berk; to discuss the roles that each of their tribes would play in the construction of the Riders' Stronghold.

Each of the chiefs offered the services of their finest smiths, stone- carvers, and other craftsmen, to work on the project â€" in addition to their best builders, and workers to aid in the construction.

When the topic turned to supplying provisions for the workers, the chiefs offered to contribute in the areas they were best able to: For instance, the Shivering Shores had a massive fishing- fleet, and their Chief was willing to divert aâ€¦ 'Healthy portion' of the fish that would otherwise have been sold or traded for other goods. Other tribes had smaller fishing- fleets, but controlled vast and rich areas of farmland â€" and, as it happened, had been buying/ trading with the Shivering Shores tribe for years.

When the conversation had progressed to the buildings themselves â€" and the purposes and functions they would need to fulfill, all eyes turned to Eragon: Having visited the _first_ of the Riders' strongholds, and having played a 'key- role' in establishing the _second_, he was clearly the one to askâ€¦

Eragon took some time describing the various buildings that would be needed. Though when Eragon finally described the scale on which these strongholds had been built, silence fell in the Great Hall of Berk â€" despite the number of Vikings gathered insideâ€|

It was Eragon who finally broke the silence, "The circumstances are rather different in this case; howeverâ€| which 'may' be for the best."

There was a general murmur of agreement at this, and the conversation continued: A tentative- date for the work to begin, and a rough-timeline, was first suggested, and then agreed to.

Two hours later...

Once those topics that they had assembled to discuss had been seen to, the conversation turned to other thingsâ€| (The length of Eragon's life, and his range of experiences during that time, was of considerable interest to the chiefs.)

Then another chief voiced a question that immediately caught the attention of his fellows, "I keep thinking back to the sizes of The Riders' strongholdsâ€| Just how big do these southern- dragons grow?"

Eragon's smiled slightly; appearing amused by the question, "So long as they get enough to eat, most dragons will continue to grow â€" though at a far slower rate, compared to their first few decades of life. Before Galbatorix forced their kind to the brink of extinction, some of the larger dragons might have passed for small- mountains. However, at that age â€" and at that size, such dragons spent most of their time in a sleep- like trance: Unless someone â€" or something, disrupts their slumber, most would remain largely indifferent to the world around them."

"You mentioned a dragon like that before, I believeâ€|" Stoick commented. "His name wasâ€| Belgabad, wasn't it?" â€"â€" This interested the other chiefs greatly, and several of them began to ask questions. Eragon waited patiently until the others again fell silent.

Once they had, Eragon began, "Belgabad was widely regarded as the greatest of his kind: The largest dragon who's name has not been lost to time... He was a wild- dragon, and spent much of his life in the northern- reaches of Alagasia. When word of Galbatorix's atrocities reached him, Belgabad bestirred himself â€" for the first time in centuries, and flew to The Riders' aid: He was killed in one of the battles that followedâ€|"

Eragon was silent for a moment, then, before he continued, "I saw his skeleton, during my first visit to the island; He was a formidable sight, even in death: A single rib- bone was neigh- on eighty feet in length, and near fifteen feet at its thickestâ€| Best as I can determine, he was between four and five- thousand years old, at the time of his death."

The meeting broke soon afterwards: The meeting had already lasted for close to three hours, and all of them were hungry â€" as well as their other obligations which they needed to attend to.

****Part Two " Building A Stronghold****

By the end of the following week, all the preparations had been made " and the building of what was to be the Home and Stronghold of the Riders of the North, had begun.

Vikings were hard- workers by nature, and the project before them inspired them as nothing else ever had. As the days and weeks passed, buildings began to rise from the ground " as stone bricks were first cut, and transported from the quarries to the building sites, then layered and cemented in place. (The knowledge to build such structures was a 'gift' from Eragon " who'd travelled to lands they'd never even heard of; even in songs, stories, or the oldest of legends")

The first structures to be built were the four watch- towers; each of which overlooked one of the four locations that Stoick had mentioned, where boats could safely make landfall. When completed, a chunk of crystal would be set- into the roof " facing the inside part of the island, where the other buildings were to go. " " When the Riders officially took- up residence on the island, and the towers manned, the sentinels stationed there would use magic to make the crystal light- up like a beacon: A darkened crystal would serve as a visual- warning that something was wrong " as well as triggering other spells designed to warn the Senior Riders of the possible- intrusion" |

Next to be built would be quarters for the future Riders and their dragons: While these would not need to be built to the same scale as those in either of the previous strongholds, they would still take time to build.

It took the better- part of two- months to complete the first of the three three-story buildings that were in their plans to start- out with, but when it was complete, everyone involved agreed that it was worth every minute of work that had gone into it.

After seven months, two- weeks, and four days, the Riders and their Dragons " who'd been 'politely exiled', until construction was finished, were called back. (After the plans had been drawn- up, even Eragon and Saphira had been asked, "if they'd be willing to wait" with their students: The builders wanted their 'finishing- touches' to come as a surprise to _all_ of them" | Amused, Eragon and Saphira had agreed " though only after they'd gone- over some of the more important details to their satisfaction.

The first time they were shown to what would one day be their respective quarters, Hiccup, Astrid, and Fishlegs were speechless: The ceiling had been decorated with a carved likeness of their dragon- partner; The furnishings were well- built, and carved with intricate designs: It was incredible. {When the three of them went to thank the builders, carvers, and other craftsmen, they'd each smile and say it was "an honour to have the opportunity" " many of them calling it a "a story to tell my grandchildren." }

The most incredible structure on the island, however, was the Great Library: Three intricate columns, each of which stood twenty- feet tall, stood on either side of the massive doors. The shelves inside remained empty " partly because the first delivery of their copies of the books Eragon had promised had yet to arrive, and partly

because these books were solely for the use of The Riders: Eragon would send for them when their new home was complete, and secure.

The following morning

The day after their tour of the newly- built stronghold, Eragon informed the first three Riders- Dragon pairs of the New Order that it was time for them to assume their 'rightful places' if only in name. (There would need to be more than three Riders to 'officially' claim and hold Dragon- Stone Island, which until that time, would remain under the shared- custody of The Six Tribes.)

For the better part of an hour, Eragon described the ceremony he'd planned for the following day. It was something they had discussed briefly; when Eragon had given them their swords, and instructed them not to keep them out of the public- eye until they were 'formally' presented to them

When Eragon finished his explanation, Hiccup, Astrid, and Fishlegs had unsheathed their swords, and placed them in the engraved box Eragon had brought with him ready for the following day.

Part Three Riders of the North: Riders In- Full

The sun had yet to rise, but a crowd had gathered in the main courtyard which sat in the center of the buildings that had been completed thus far; and directly in- front of the Great- Library: Men, women, and children from each of the six Viking tribes that had joined The Riders' Pact.

At the top of the staircase to the Great Library, stood Eragon and Saphira. Near the base of the stairway leading to the doors, stood Hiccup and Toothless, Astrid and Stormfly, and Fishlegs and Meatlug.

Hiccup was attracting even more attention than usual: He had exchanged his usual shirt and vest for garb of black- leather crossed, in places, with brown. At first glance, it could easily be mistaken for armour, though closer inspection revealed the true- nature of the material: The change made Hiccup seem older, more mature, and ready to assume his new role.

When Eragon inclined his head in a barely- noticeable nod, his and Saphira's students Riders and Dragons, began to make their way up the stairs, towards Eragon.

As they did, they heard first a rush of whispers, and rustling cloth, as everyone's unknown number eyes fixed on the six of them

Five steps from the top, Astrid and Stormfly who'd been walking on Hiccup's right, and Fishlegs and Meatlug who stood to Toothless's left, stopped and Hiccup and Toothless climbed the remaining steps alone

When he reached second- to- last step from the top, Hiccup knelt, and began to speak: reciting the oaths he had agreed to during the first meeting with the Chiefs of the other tribes.

With his command of the Ancient- Language, Eragon had cast a spell

that " for the duration of this ceremony, those below would be able to understand the words of the oaths that Hiccup spoke. So that all who heard would hear him honour his promises, and the seeds of doubt would have not the slightest opportunity to take root.

"I accept the leadership of The Riders of The North; and all the duties and responsibilities that accompany the title. I shall honour and uphold the honour of Our Orders; to follow the path set by those who came before us. When the time comes that I must take up my inheritance " as Chief of Berk, I will accept those duties and responsibilities, in addition to those I take on now: Neglecting neither; but acting in both " each independently of the other. And " when I reach the age of five- and- sixty; the age of Berks' Eldest Chief to- date; I shall abdicate that title freely " and continue in the Role I now assume, and shall hold until the end of my days." His oaths finished, Hiccup awaited Eragon's reply.

Nodding in approval, Eragon said, "Then rise; as the Leader of The Riders of The North: Uphold your oaths; Live long, and well." As Hiccup got to his feet, Eragon lifted Hiccup's sword from the carved wooden box Hiccup had seen the previous day. Holding it up so that those gathered before him could see the blade, Eragon continued, "Since The Riders were founded, it has been our custom that a Rider receive a sword of their own " when they take their place as a Full Member of Our Order." Turning his attention back to Hiccup, Eragon said, "Today, you claim your place as a Rider " and with it, your sword: Such a weapon must have a name. What shall it be?"

On his feet, now, Hiccup gave voice to the name he had chosen, "Fury."

Eragon nodded, and placed his hand over the unmarked portion of the hilt. He murmured several words in the Ancient- Language, and the appropriate glyph appeared in the designated spot. Eragon then handed the sword to Hiccup; Hiccup thanked him, and returned it to its sheath.

Then Eragon moved to one side, and Hiccup moved to where he had been. Turning to face his friends, and " past them, the people gathered below, he nodded to Astrid.

Astrid came forward " a little pink in the face, and knelt before Hiccup. just as Hiccup had knelt before Eragon. Unlike Hiccup, however, Astrid had no oaths to swear: She simply acknowledged Hiccup as the leader of the Riders of the North, and he presented her with her sword.

Then Hiccup repeated the process with Fishlegs.

Eragon again stepped forward, "The Riders of The North!"

. And the Vikings below roared their approval.

**To be continued...**

25. Chapter 25

Chapter Twenty- Five " Rise of The New Order

****Part One " Visiting the Wild- Dragons****

During the week following the Ceremony, the newly- named Riders of the North journeyed to the island- homes of each individual species of wild- dragon (" with the exception of the Smothering Smokebreath, and those others that - from past experience, they knew had no interest in associating with humans).

Somewhat to their surprise, the dragons seemed to have been expecting them " and to know the reason for their visit. Some of the dragons appeared uneasy, but their unease quickly faded; others were more intrigued, though they all had questions.

Hiccup, Astrid, and Fishlegs took turns describing the spells that would be placed on "any eggs that they (the dragons) chose to entrust to Our Order", and how these spells would allow the dragon within each egg to choose and bond with the Rider of their choice. Satisfied with the explanations they were given, a significant number of dragons agreed to contribute, though most of them decided to start with a single egg...

****Part Two " New Riders****

Hiccup, Astrid, Fishlegs, and their dragons all knew that they would be expected to oversee the instruction of future- Riders. Initially, the idea made them feel 'a little apprehensive'. They devoted a great deal of time discussing how they would go about it, as they passed the time until the wild- dragons laid their next clutches of eggs.

At one point, Eragon informed the six of them that he and Saphira would remain in the north until their first group of students had been trained" and perhaps a little longer, if needed. Eragon would be present while Hiccup, Astrid, and Fishlegs instructed the new Riders, even as Saphira would be with their dragons. Both would watch and listen; and perhaps make the occasional comment or suggestion, but nothing more.

_One month later" _

Hiccup, Astrid, and Fishlegs had arrived at the Shivering Shores an hour after noon, bringing with them the first five dragon- eggs entrusted to their care. The eggs now rested atop five barrels; each set several feet apart from one another. Astrid stood between and just behind the two leftmost barrels; Hiccup behind the centermost barrel; and Fishlegs kept watch over the rightmost barrels " and the eggs that rested upon them. Near- by, Eragon and Saphira were paying close attention to the proceedings; watching for the slightest trace of movement among the eggs.

For over an hour, Viking age fifteen or older who wished to present themselves to the eggs were given the opportunity to do so" A crowd had, of course, gathered to watch " a 'significant' portion of which consisted of those too young to join- in, but clearly wanted to.

The first hour passed without incident, but soon afterwards"

"Wait," Eragon said, gesturing to a boy of perhaps sixteen; motioning

him back to the third egg in the line. "Try again."

Startled, the boy Eragon had indicated returned to the previous egg â€" which he'd turned away from only a moment before. Silence fell, and every eye turned to focus on the youth as he again held his right- hand out, over the egg. For almost a minute, nothing happened, and then the egg wobbled. It was a slight motion, at first, but it became more and more noticeableâ€| Then the first cracks appeared in the shell, and, a moment later, the infant dragon emerged â€" sending fragments of eggshell flying in all directions. An expression of awe spread across the face of the new- Rider. Almost hesitantly, he lowered his hand slightly; and at the same moment, the dragon raised its headâ€| A moment later, hand and head made contact; and there was a sudden, blinding, flash of light. When it faded, a moment later, the youth was staring at his palmâ€| at the silvery- mark that had appeared there.

The Chief of the Shivering Shores immediately sent two men to the docks to bring the hatchling its first meal. While they were gone, others came forward to congratulate the new Rider, and to meet his dragon (â€" as well as suggesting possible names for him).

When â€" at last, the crowds' attention returned to the remaining eggs, the process continued as before. (Although the line had grown a fair bit longer than it had been previously â€" and not because people were sneaking- in for another passâ€| Eragon had made it clear that repetition would not change the end- result: Either you would be chosen, or you would not.) Meanwhile, Damian, the new- Rider, and his dragon had moved to join to Eragon; and Damian was asking Eragon for advice on possible dragon- names.

The second- to- last member of the tribe to present themselves to the eggs was a girl â€" Amara. She had passed the first three eggs, and was turning away from the fourth, whenâ€| "A moment," Eragon spoke up â€" motioning the girl back to the fourth barrel, and the egg resting on it.

Amara's face lit up, and she returned to the egg that Eragon had indicated â€" holding her left- hand out, over the Deadly- Nadder egg. Even though she knew more- or- less what to expect, the sight of the silvery- mark that appeared on her hand â€" a moment later, seemed to have left her speechlessâ€|

One week later...

By the end of that week, Eragon and Saphira, their students, and those who were to be their students' students, returned to Berk. The newly- hatched dragons were, of course, far too small to fly â€" much less carry their respective Riders' weight, so the then of them (â€| five humans, and their five dragons), joined Eragon on Saphira's back. (The blue- dragon was so large; she didn't even notice the extra- weight.)

****Part Three â€" Dragon Riders: A New Beginning****

It had been almost a year since Hiccup, Astrid, Fishlegs, and their dragons had first presented themselves to Eragon and Saphira in this clearing: It felt like it had been a lifetime ago...

Today, the three of them sat to Eragon's right, and the five new

Dragon Riders sat before them; Damian " his Monstrous Nightmare curled- up next to him; Amara " with her Deadly Nadder. The other three Riders sat next to them, with their dragons.

Once everyone had settled, Eragon gave them a general idea of what to expect in future lessons: He explained that Hiccup, Astrid, and Fishlegs would be the ones to instruct them in the ways of The Riders; while Toothless, Stormfly and Meatlug instructed their dragons " once the five hatchlings were of an appropriate size. "Today, however," Eragon concluded, "â€| you may ask what questions you will, and â€| in most cases, I will answer them."

After a moment, Amara asked, "Is itâ€| 'Ok' to use magic? My grandfather used to tell me stories; Legends about sorcerers who would use black- magic to summon demonsâ€|" She stopped speaking, then, and glanced at Eragon " as though uncertain of how he might react.

"An apt question," Eragon said, approvingly. "Many believe that 'magic' and 'sorcery' are but two words for the same thing. In truth, 'sorcery' is but a single branch of magic: dark, dangerous, and fiendishly- complicated." Eragon paused for a moment, and then asked, "Did these stories make any mention of spirits, by any chance?"

Amara nodded " appearing surprised, "Grandfather said that spirits live in a realm of their own: That they were evil creatures that helped sorcerers spread chaosâ€| But what do spirits have to with sorcery?"

"Everything," Eragon said, simply, "Properly defined, 'sorcery' is the act of using magic to summon and control spirits. When a spell-caster attempts such a feat, they are trying to force incredibly powerful beings to obey their orders; beings that devote every moment of their imprisonment to finding and exploiting flaws in the spells that bind them. If they succeed, the spirits will subjugate whoever had imprisoned them, and they would become what are known as a 'Shade'. When this happens, the only way to stop the Shade is to kill it, and that is a feat even the oldest and wisest of Riders would hesitate to attempt."

"Have you ever faced aâ€| a 'Shade'?" Gren " another of the new Riders asked, awe in his voice.

Eragon nodded, "I have been fortunate enough to have survived encounters with three Shades: I killed Durza when I was not much older than you are now " with help from both Saphira and Arya. Several months later, Arya killed Varog " with help from both Saphira and myself. The third was more recentâ€| nearly four- hundred years past, now; I believe: It wasâ€| 'Unpleasant', but the spirits imprisoned within Zylus was not as knowledgeable as Durza, or as powerful as Varog."

Several minutes passed in silence, as the listeners considered what Eragon had told themâ€| (Something they seemed to be doing a lot of, lately " Hiccup reflected.)

Damian was next to speak, "I heard you're one of the only people who know the name of the 'ancient- language'â€| Did you discover it yourself? " And why is it so important?"

As before, Eragon appeared pleased with the questions, "Everything â€" from the elements, to plants and animals, to individual people, have a name in the Ancient- Language: When you learn a name in the Ancient- Language, you gain power over whatever it is that the name describes. The True- Name of the Ancient- Language â€" or, as it is also called, The Name of All Names, grants power over everything that has been given a name in that language; as well as the power to 'give' a name to those few things that remain unnamed." Eragon paused to let that sink- in, than continued, "And â€" to answer your first question: No, I did not discover the Name of Namesâ€" That secret was unearthed by the greatest enemy Our Order has ever known: Galbatorix, himself."

Nobody spoke for over a minute: Everyone appeared stunned by the newsâ€"

Eragon continued to speak, "During one of our earlier clashes, I told Murtagh that if he and Thorn could change some element of their personality, their true- names would change; and their oaths to Galbatorix would lose their power over them. Hearing this, Murtagh agreed that he and Thorn would 'give the idea some thought'. When the four of us had gathered in Galbatorix's throne room, he announced that he wanted to know which of us was the better warrior: As we fought, I saw that something in him had changed, and by the end of our fight, he'd noticed it as well."

"Their true- names had changedâ€" hadn't they?" Hiccup asked.

Eragon nodded, "Murtagh told me to 'get ready', then he rounded to on Galbatorix: He evoked the Name of Names, and stripped Galbatorix of his wards â€" his magical- defences. At the same moment, Thorn and Saphira attacked Shrukinâ€" Galbatorix retaliated; I'm not sure exactly what he did, but it took a heavy toll on Murtagh. Then Galbatorix attacked my mind with his ownâ€" Eragon was silent for almost a minute; "I had never encountered such a powerful mental- attack â€" before, or sinceâ€" With every passing second, he restricted my consciousness. Then I remembered a piece of advice that my father had given me: 'Never allow yourself to become so focused on a single outcome, that you cannot see past it; to another possibility'. It wasn't easy, but I forced myself to accept the possibility that _we might not be able_ to best Galbatorix, and I decided that â€" if I was to spend the rest of my life answering to him, then first I would make sure that he understood what he had done; and felt for himself the pain, grief, and torment he had inflicted on others."

Another thought occurred to Hiccup, and he frowned, "If Galbatorix had control of the ancient- language, then how could you haveâ€" The truth came to him, then: "You didn't use the ancient- language."

Eragon shrugged, "Galbatorix had made it so that we couldn't use the ancient- language to cast spells; and even if we could use magic, the wording would have been beyond anything I could compose on a spur- of- the- moment. In any event, it worked: Unable to live with the knowledge of what he had done, Galbatorix used magic to take his own life."

Their conversation continued for several hours, as they moved from

one topic to another. When they grew hungry, they built a fire, and cooked some of the fish they'd brought with them (" they'd brought more than enough for the young dragons).

****Part Four " Unexpected Visitors****

In time, the sun began to dip below the horizon " and the shadows were beginning to lengthen. Suddenly, Eragon stiffened " as though he sensed trouble|

"Ebrithiln, what|? " Hiccup started to ask.

Eragon gestured for silence, and " in a low whisper, said, "Spirits| Whatever you do, don't try to use magic: It will only startle them." Seeing Amara's worried expression, Eragon added, "So long as we don't cast spells, they won't trouble us; nor are they of a sort to remain in one place for long."

A moment later, a cluster of multi-coloured lights appeared over the crest of a distant ridge: There were twenty, in all " and they were coming closer with every passing second. Then the orbs were swirling and tumbling around one another " perhaps fifty feet above them, and a single orb descended towards where they sat. As it drew closer, the air around them began to hum and crackle with energy|

As it drew closer, Eragon slowly rose to his feet. Then the orb was hovering a few feet in- front of Eragon, who reached out a hand towards it. The moment he touched the center of the thing from which the light radiated, an expression of apparent joy appeared on his face. For several minutes, the two remained thus: Eragon with his palm lightly touching the sphere of light, as the light of the sphere changed from blue, to green, to red. Then it turned black, then blue, and " finally, a brilliant gold|

Then " as quickly as they had come, the orb shot up to re-join those clustered above them| Then they shot off in the direction from which they had come, and vanished from view.

"Well| that was unexpected," Eragon commented, as he returned to his previous position.

"What| What did it want?" Amara asked.

"Spirits| don't have a 'language' as we would understand it, so conversing with their kind is never easy," Eragon explained. "From what I could gather, the one that was just here|" Eragon paused to indicate where the closest orb had been, "| and several of the others were among those who'd been imprisoned within the Shade, Durza " and a few of the others had been confined within Varog; another Shade I helped to dispatch| It seems that they recognized me, and decided to pay a quick visit: Spirits rarely bother with our kind, so it's rather high- praise " from them."

Eragon turned his attention skyward, "And now, I think, it is time we all turned- in for the night: Tomorrow is not far off, and you all need your rest."

With that, they parted ways " each bound for their own beds.

****Part Five "Leave- Taking****

Four months later

The new Riders and their Dragons were proving themselves to be excellent students, and Hiccup, Astrid, Fishlegs, and their dragons were quickly gaining confidence as teachers.

A week into the fourth month, Eragon sent word south " requesting that the first of the recently- completed copies of books for the Northern Library be forwarded to Dragon-Stone Island. The Riders of the North still lacked the numbers to 'hold' Dragon-Stone Island, but " from that point on, Hiccup and the others instructed their students there; they would fly out in the morning, and return in the evening.

When the books arrived, they spent the better part of the next two weeks examining their contents. The books, it was agreed, would remain on Dragon-Stone Island: Every evening, before they left for Berk, Hiccup would cast a spell to seal the entrances to the Great Library, and place spells to prevent anyone from tampering with them; He, and he alone, knew the spells needed to open the doors.

While their own students meditated " in their respective locations, Hiccup, Astrid, and Fishlegs continued to be instructed by Eragon. Under his and Saphira's supervision, they began to practice casting spells without the ancient- language " controlling the magic with their thoughts, alone. (The first few times he tried, Fishlegs' nervousness got the better of him, and he set a lone oak-tree on fire " instead of the bundle of sticks that was meant to serve as the target of his spell.) Hiccup and Astrid fared better in their attempts; as both of them had steadier minds, worked better under pressure, and " after witnessing Fishlegs's mistake, had a newfound respect for the importance of keeping their focus when engaged in such a task. (Both also made a point of quietly double- checking their wards against magic " Just to be safe.)

In this fashion, the days, weeks, and months continued to pass.

Four months later

Eight months after Hiccup, Astrid, and Fishlegs first assumed their role as teachers, Eragon announced that it was near- time for Saphira and himself to return south " to the main- stronghold of The Riders. They had been in the Great Hall of Berk, at the time, and the words immediately caught the attention of the others in the Hall.

When he heard the words, Hiccup got to his feet, gave a short bow in Eragon's direction, and " speaking in the Ancient- Language, thanked Eragon for all that he and Saphira had done for them. The other Riders got to their feet as well, and followed Hiccup's example. Even their dragons dipped their heads, and repeated the lines as their Riders had.

When they had finished, Stoick " and the other Vikings gathered in the Hall, insisted that Eragon wait another three days before departing, so they could be given "a proper send-off." Eragon, who seemed unsurprised by the request, agreed. (He also agreed to visit

again â€" in a few years; also at the insistence of those gathered in the Hall).

_On the morning of the fourth day, following Eragon's announcement_â€|

The entire population of Berk had gathered to see Eragon off. Even Mildew had appeared: He was glad to hear that Eragon was leaving, and doing a bad job of hiding it.

At one point, Hiccup saw Eragon's eyes fall on Mildew, though the Elder Rider appeared more amused than anythingâ€| A moment later, Eragon turned to Hiccup, "I almost forgot, but I've got something for youâ€|" Silence fell among the villagers, as Eragon produced a scroll from one of Saphira's saddlebags, and handed it to Hiccup. "It's the first spell I cast when I arrived on Berk; in case 'someone' starts offering his opinions where they're not wanted again."

Mildew's eyes bulged, "Oh, no: Not that donkey- braying nonsense!" Even as he spoke the words, those watching remembered the spell to which Eragon had been referring, and many of them struggled to hold-back their laughter.

A small smile appeared on Eragon's face, "Ah; I see you remember itâ€| Good: Maybe it'll help you remember to curb your 'braying'." Mildew grumbled a little more (â€" though the last few words sounded suspiciously like a sheep bleating), then he turned on his heels, and stomped off.

Once Mildew was gone â€" and the chuckles of those who'd heard the low- bleats had died down, the villagers and Eragon said the last of their farewells, and Eragon clambered onto Saphira's back.

The massive blue- dragon took off, and rose into the sky. The people gathered on the cliff waited until it had vanished from view, before they returned to their various tasks of the day.

Eragon had changed their lives forever, and â€" however long Eragon himself might live, he would live far longer in the legends of the Vikings.

**The End.**

26. Chapter 26

****Chapter Twenty- Six â€" Unexpected Guests****

****Part One: Strange Creatures****

Three months after Eragon and Saphira's departureâ€|

It had been three months and four days, since Eragon and Saphira had left Berk, to begin the long journey back to the Southern Stronghold of The Riders.

During that time, Hiccup, Astrid, Fishlegs, and their dragons had continued to instruct the first of their students: Damian and his Monstrous Nightmare, Solaris; Amara and her Deadly Nadder, Spike; Gren and his Gronkle, Grog; Kyra and her Monstrous Nightmare,

Skyblaze â€" 'Sky', for short; and Edric and his Thunderdrum, Thorin.

Because of how hard they'd been working, Hiccup had suggested that they finish a few hours early, that day. He also offered to show the new Riders and their Dragons the clearing where Eragon had stayed, and where Saphira had trained _their_ dragons; once they'd returned to Berk. â€| It wasn't exactly 'on their way,' but the weather was _perfect_ for flying. The others had agreed immediately.

After they'd been in the air for a time, Gren said, "I've been thinking about that 'creature' that that farmer said he saw, the other dayâ€| Any idea what it might've been?"

Hiccup shook his head, he'd been thinking about that two; "Noâ€| Nothing like that has ever been seen here, before."

Flashbackâ€|

The first 'sighting' had been a few days previously, or rather: evenings previously. A farmer had been doing a final- check of his tool- shed; to be sure that he hadn't left anything in his field, or had otherwise 'wandered off'. Suddenly, he'd seen movement out of the corner of his eye. Turning in that direction, he'd caught a brief glimpse of â€| something: the gleam of a pair of eyes, looking back at him. Then the creature, whatever it was, had hissed at him, and darted away.

The tale had spread, of course, but â€" fortunately, Vikings had a tendency to be sceptical, when told tales of that sort. Still: after the recent 'business' regarding the Ra-Zacâ€| It had sent a shiver of unease down the spines of all who'd heard it.

_A few hours later_â€|

The sun was nearing the horizon, when their dragons landed near the outskirts of Berk; and their Riders began to dismount. They were about to set off towards the Great Hall, where the villagers would be gathering for supper, when they heard the barking.

Hiccup sighed, "Great; What is it this time?"

The others reacted in differing ways: Astrid sighed, rolled her eyes, and shook her head; Fishlegs shook his head; and their dragons simply snorted. Their students, both human and dragon, were clearly trying not to laugh.

A few minutes later, a figure came into view; an elderly man, clutching a walking stick in one hand: Mildew. He spotted them, and hurried towards them; "RUFF! â€| RUFF! â€| RUFF! â€| HA-WHOOO!" By the time he'd reached them, though, the laughter had died: Mildew face was as white as snow, and he was shaking with fear.

Hiccup spoke several lines in the Ancient- Language; removing the spell he'd placed on Mildew the previous morning. Then, switching back to their native tongue, he asked; "What happened?"

"Iâ€| I've never seen anything like it," Mildew rasped. "Some kind of animal; it was 'bout this tall; on all- fours..." As he spoke, Mildew

angled his staff, so that the end hovered about three feet off the ground. "Dark fur; claws... It was lying curled up on a rock, couldn't tell what it was, so I went for a closer look. Thing leapt to its feet â€¦ Looked like it was about to pounce; but instead itâ€¦ It hissed at me; then it shook itself, and ran off!"

"Thatâ€¦ That sounds like what that farmer saw, the other night!" Amara commented, a touch of unease in her voice.

Hiccup and Astrid exchanged a look, then Hiccup turned to the others; "We need to tell the others about this: Once can be a coincidence: especially when it happened after nightfall; Twice, and this time in broad daylightâ€¦ There's something out there."

_Ten minutes later, in the Great Hall_â€¦

Their timing, as it turned out, couldn't have been much better: Stoick, Gobber, and five other men were seated at a table, near the head of the hall. When Stoick saw his son, he held up a hand, halting the conversation, and gestured for Hiccup and those with him to come forward.

Hiccup didn't waste words, "There's beenâ€¦ a new development; in connection to the 'sighting', from the other night." Turning to Mildew, he added; "Tell them what you told us."

Mildew looked a little surprised, but he did as Hiccup asked, sharing both the details of the encounter itself, and the description of the creature that seemed to match the account they'd already heard, from the farmer. When he finished, the silence stretched for several minutes. Hiccup could tell that this second encounter made a far more significant impression on them than had the first; the same was true with him, when he'd heard it. (The second one had been in daylight.)

After a brief pause, Hiccup continued; "Judging from the first two encounters, I don't think they're hostile; but we still need to know why they're here."

Gobber raised an eyebrow, "And let me guess: you've already got a plan on how to do that."

Hiccup smiled, "There's only one way to know for sure: We need to find one." He gestured at the other Riders and Dragons, "Tomorrow, we'll make a circuit of the island; see what we can find."

The silence that followed lasted for several minutes. Finally, Kyra spoke up, "Uhâ€¦ Are you sure about this, Hic- I mean, Ebrithiln? â€¦ I mean: we've got no idea what these things are, andâ€¦"

"Scared?" Gren asked, a small smirk on his face.

Kyra whirled to face him; "I'm _not_ scared, I'mâ€¦"

"â€¦ Being cautious," Hiccup finished, turning to face them as he spoke. Hiccup turned to Gren, and continued; "Abandon caution, and you will almost surely fall prey to anyone stronger, faster, or better- prepared than yourselvesâ€¦" Hiccup shifted his gaze to Kyra; "But if we never make use of those secrets entrusted to us, we might just as well never have learned them." By the time he finished,

Hiccup was again facing his father, as though he'd never turned away.

It took them a moment to process what Hiccup had just done: Inside of a minute, he had subtly addressed any concerns his father might've voiced; praised and warned Kyra on the up and downsides of caution, if one allowed it to drift to either extreme; and given Gren a silent warning.

Astrid raised an eyebrow; "'Someone's' spent a lot of time talking to the Elves, when they were here."

Hiccup smiled and shrugged, "Elves have a real passion for riddles and philosophyâ€¦ So; yeah: We got along great!"

Finally, Stoick nodded; "All right, then: See what you can find; but be careful, all of you."

Hiccup nodded, and turned to leave, followed by the other Riders and the Dragons, though 'a few' of them still appeared a little uneasy.

****Part Two: The Werecat****

The following afternoon...

They'd begun their search three hours before noon, checking the clearings and pathways that ran between Mildew's house, and Berk. It made sense, after all, to start near to the most recent sighting, and work out from there.

Midday came, and there was no sign of anything unusual. On an impulse, Hiccup suggested that they set- down in the cove, and eat their lunch there: bread, cheese for the humans, and fish; some for the Riders; but most of it for the dragons. Meatlug and Fishlegs stayed behind to cook the fish, and keep an eye for movement from their vantage point.

Meanwhile, Hiccup and the other Riders were making a circuit of the cove; to see if they could find what they were looking for. They'd gone almost a third of the way around the lake without finding anything.

Hiccup stepped around a stand of trees, and then pulled back. He turned to the others, and nodded, motioning for them to come forward. Almost hesitantly, they moved to join Hiccup, and peered out from behind the stand of trees.

The creature looked much as Mildew had described it. It lay, stretched out, across the top of a fair- sized boulder, basking in the warmth of the sun. At the base of the boulder, was a small mound of what appeared to be clothing.

Amara turned to Hiccup, wide- eyed, and whispered; "Doâ€¦ do you think itâ€¦ ate_ someone?"

"No," Hiccup said, with a certainty that surprised them. "If there were it had, there'd be blood on theâ€¦"

"â€¦ Clothes? Only one way to find out!" Then, before anyone could

stop her, Kyra leapt out from behind the trees, and bolted forward; pausing just long enough to glare at Gren, as though to say 'Who's scared, now?'

Kyra's outstretched hand was three feet from the pile, when another presence reached out, touching each of the Riders' minds, and a voice said; 'And just what do you think you are doing?' Even as the words faded from their minds, the creature's eyes snapped open; and glowing golden eyes locked onto Kyra's. Kyra froze where she stood, not wanting to move forward, and not daring to move back.

After Kyra had leapt forward, the others knew there was little point in remaining hidden; though they approached much more cautiously. Once the creature had opened its eyes and spoken, Hiccup stepped forward; "Our apologies for the interruption!" An instant later, the creature's eyes were on him.

The creature took a moment to examine each of them in turn. Then its attention returned to Hiccup, and the voice said; 'Ah, yesss! You would be Hiccup, then: The First Dragon- Rider of The North; the son of Berk's Chief; He Who Rides a Night- Fury; and Felled the Red Death! Yesss! Such a strong beginning to your story; a tale worth telling, and retelling; despite the fact that it has barely begun.'

Hiccup frowned; "How do you know so much about me?"

The creature leapt from the top of its boulder, clearing the top of Kyra's head by several feet. It landed seven feet to Hiccup's left, and let out a growl- like chuckle; 'You told your story to Eragon; and he relayed it to Arya! What we didn't hear from or through one, we heard from or through the other. Our kind has been friends of The Riders since the time of The First Order, and friends of the dragons for even longer.'

Hiccup eyes widened as the truth came to him: "A werecat! You're a werecat!"

The werecat smiled, and the air around him rippled. When it cleared, a dark- haired boy stood where the cat had been; a loincloth knotted around his waist. He was dark- haired, and a few inches shorter than Hiccup, though had a similar build. He smiled, "Very good, Hiccup. Yes, I am a werecat; one of the twelve who are now on Berk." He frowned, and shrugged; "At least; there were twelve of us here, when I last checked! The number changes from day to day; a few of us leave, others arrive."

Astrid was next to overcome her shock; "A werecat on Berk! Gods; didn't see that one coming!" She frowned, "Not to be rude, but! What are you doing here?" Almost as an afterthought, she added "And! Who are you?"

"Ah, right: Where are my manners? ! Probably in one of my pockets!" He returned to the base of his boulder, and rummaged among the pile of clothes. Then pulled on a cotton shirt; a pair of pants, and, last of all, a leather vest; similar to the one Hiccup used to wear, before he'd been named Leader of The Riders of The North.

By the time he straightened, their dragons had re-joined them, and were waiting next to their Riders; save for Fishlegs. Only with the

arrival of their dragons, did it dawn on Hiccup and the others that Fishlegs and Meatlug would be wondering what had happened to them.

Hiccup turned back to the werecat; "Soâ€¦ What do we call you?"

"Hmmm; Names can be tricky," the werecat mused. "Among my own kind, I am calledâ€¦" He made a series of growls and yowls that no human vocal- cords could replicate. He smiled, a little, at the expressions on their faces; "I also have my share of nicknames, all werecats do; but, for the sake of convenience, you may call me 'Bryon'."

"Well, Bryon," Hiccup continued, "We were about to have lunch; care to join us?"

Bryon smiled; "Funny: I was about to doze- off, and _dream of_ eating lunch; I like your idea betterâ€¦ And, as it happens, I've just gotten back to Berk from a 'little trip' of my own; and I've come across a few pieces that you may find 'interesting'â€¦ You in particular, Hiccup."

**To be continuedâ€¦**

27. Chapter 27

****Chapter Twenty- Seven****

****Part One â€" The Legend of Lutharian****

_Five minutes later_â€¦

The relief on Fishlegs's face, when the other Riders and Dragons re-joined him and Meatlug, was evident. The moment the dragons' claws touched the ground, Fishlegs was rushing towards them; asking questions, as he came.

Hiccup gave him the highlights of their initial encounter, and introduced the Werecat to both Fishlegs and Meatlug. Once the 'formalities' had been observed, they settled down to eat.

After a suitable amount of time had passed, Hiccup turned to Byron; "You said that you'd come across some information that might interest us?"

The werecat nodded, slightly, "An old legend, which was what sparked my and my brethren's initial interest in coming north; and a story I came across more recently." Byron glanced at Hiccup, and turned to face Astrid; "You had asked me what I, and the other werecats, were doing on Berk?" Astrid nodded, and Byron continued; "The concept of a new 'branch' of the Riders _intrigued_ us, but what _really_ caught our interest was Eragon's descriptions of the _northern dragons_; which seem to fit an old legend that might have been lost to time, had my forebears not learned of it, and seen fit to pass it on â€¦ A legend that dates back to before The Fall of The First Order; and described a variety of dragons; unlike those to the south, and how they came to be as they now are." Byron shrugged, "It seemed too good an opportunity to pass up: A chance to fill- in the missing pieces, and see if there is truth to the ancient legend â€¦ The Legend of

Lutharian; The White."

For almost a full minute, nobody spoke. Finally, Toothless asked, **'How (we) came to be as (we) now are?' â€| What's that supposed to mean? â€" And who is this 'Lutharian'? '**

Byron was quick to reply; "Lutharian was a wild- dragon, at the time, he'd have been... perhaps... two- thirds the size that Belgabad was; at the time of the latter's death. According to the legend, Lutharian was one of the very few dragons who chose to fly further north than the most northerly point of Alagasia; to see what he would discover. This was particularly unusual; as most dragons of that size spent the majority of their time in the trance- like state, which I believe Eragon told you about."

"According to the story, he reached a distant land â€" far, far to the north; and there, Lutharian found something he did not expect: Dragons â€| All of them far smaller than he was, at the time; but otherwise much the same â€" save for the fact that they were struggling to survive. Cold does not usually trouble a dragon, but the harsh storms; long winters; and other difficulties, were taking a heavy toll on them. Lutharian travelled throughout this region, and, whenever he encountered a group of dragons, he asked each the same questions, 'Why do you subject yourselves to these conditions? Why not return south, where the food is more plentiful, the weather milder, and death a less- constant companion?' The wording of the answers he received differed, but the gist was the same: 'this is our home, now; and we will not yield it to wind and water, however cold. If we are to die here, than we will die as Dragons; not as cowards!'"

Byron waited for a moment, to let the implications of this sink- in, then he continued; "Their answers satisfied and impressed Lutharian, to the point that the Gift of Magic â€" which dragons cannot call upon demand, came to him; and he cast a spell- without- words. Afterwards, these northern- dragons began to change; adapting to their new, harsher, environment at an accelerated rate; fast enough for them to survive, where they would otherwise have died. The spell even granted each dragon some control in how they changed; though its structure maintained a close resemblance between them, depending on the nature of the changes that each dragon desired. Within a year, or two, they 'settled' firmly into the forms they had chosen."

A sense of awe settled upon those listening, and was evident in Stormfly's voice, when the blue- Nadder asked, **'What happened to Lutharian after he completed his spell? â€| Did he return south? '**

Byron shook his head, "If Lutharian had returned south, his tale would've been common- knowledge; Noâ€| According to the story, he chose to settle somewhere in the most northerly portion of this new region, and brought his spell to bear upon himself, as well as the dragons he had changed." Byron shrugged, "The 'account' ended thereabouts, leaving a great many questions unanswered: Where did this happen, if in fact it did; How did the story make its way south, since Lutharian chose not to return; What changes did Lutharian chose to apply to himself?" The corner of Byron's mouth twitched, "I'm sure you can understand our 'interest' in answering these questions." â€" There was a murmur of general agreement, at this.

Then another thought occurred to Hiccup, "You also mentioned a 'more recent' discovery of yoursâ€¦"

Byron raised an eyebrow, "Something I heard from a northern- dragon, a few days agoâ€¦ but that can wait a little longer, I think. Our little 'meeting' today leads me to believe that I'm not the first werecat to have 'met' a member of your tribe; and I'm betting that they'd like some answers too?"

The others had to admit that this was 'more than likely' the case; so they finished eating. Then they remounted their dragons â€" Byron caught a lift on Toothless, and the dragons took to the skies.

An hour later; The Great Hall...

By now, word that the Riders and Dragons were 'looking- into' the sightings of the mysterious creatures had gotten out. So, of course, the moment one of the villagers caught sight of them returning, a crowd began to gather at the Great Hall. (Everyone being fully aware that the first place they would go would be to check- in with Chief Stoick, and explain what they'd found.)

The appearance of a stranger, Byron, came as a surprise to the villagers; but they continued to crowd in, after him, the Riders, and Dragons.

The moment Byron saw Mildew, his face split into a grin, and he said, "Hello, again; Dog-Man â€¦ having a '_ruff_' day?"

Before people could start asking questions, Hiccup launched into an account, first of their search; then of the legend Byron had shared â€" which was of considerable interest to the listeners, though some were 'a little' uneasy at the possibility of a dragon the likes of Lutharian living in the Archipelagos; and, finally, of the 'recent story' Byron had claimed would be of 'particular interest' to them.

The moment those words were out of Hiccup's mouth; the Great Hall fell silent, and every eye went to Byronâ€¦

****Part Two â€" The Truth about 'That Night'****

Byron turned in a slow circle, taking in the hall, and everyone in it. Finally, he turned back to Hiccup, who was standing next to his father; "What I am about to tell you, is an account I heard from a dragon who was part of a _very particular_ raid on Berk, that occurred nearly _fifteen years_ agoâ€¦" Stoick stiffened, and Byron noticed, and raised an eyebrow; "I think you know the one I'm referring to."

His voice low, Stoick said, "The night that â€¦ my wifeâ€¦ Valkaâ€¦"

Byron nodded, "The truth of what happened is not what you think: That Stormcutter relayed his version of events to the dragons with him that night, and one of them â€" who I happened to meet, the other day, relayed the information to me." Byron smiled, then, and turned to Hiccup, "It would seem, Hiccup, that you are _the second Viking_ to ever ride a dragon; not the first. To be brief: Your motherâ€¦ Valka, was it? ... and this Stormcutter formed a connection of their

own. When youâ€¦" Byron nodded to Stoick, "burst in, and tried to scare the Stormcutter off, he interpreted it as an _implied- threat_ to the _both_ of them. So, he picked her up, and carried her off; under the impression that _he_ was bringing _her_ to safety."

The silence in the hall was absolute.

It was Byron who spoke next, "Before parting from the other dragons who'd been part of that raid, this Stormcutter told them that he intended to bring her to, what he called, 'The Alpha's Sanctuary'â€¦"

'**The Alpha?' **Toothless asked; he sounded stunned, as though he couldn't believe what he was hearing.

'**I thought he was just a legendâ€¦' ** Stormfly said, her tone reverent.

Stoick seemed unable to speak, but Byron asked, "Would either of you happen to know where this 'sanctuary' might be?"

Toothless seemed to shrug; '**'In the story, it's always to the north; though no one that I know of knew where it was supposed to _be_ â€¦ I've always thought it was just that: A legend; "The Legend of the White Sentinel" â€¦ The White â€¦ **_**Lutharian**_**?'**

Byron's eyes glinted, "It could beâ€¦ All of the pieces seem to fit!" He turned to Stoick, "And if it is true, and that Stormcutter brought her there, naming her a friend to dragons, there would be no safer place for her to be."

The werecat turned to Hiccup, then, "You have done the Dragons a great service; first by freeing them from the Red- Death, and finding them a place on Berk; than helping to establish the Northern- branch of The Riders. Werecats have always been friends to dragons; and a favour to them is a favour to us: Continue to do as you have; _we_ will search for the 'Alpha's Sanctuary'." The moment the words left his mouth; the air around Byron rippled, as he changed back into his animal- form.

The werecat expertly pushed the empty garb into a leather 'pack' he'd been carrying with him; slid a paw into each of the two loops, and swung it onto his back. Then he bounded for the doors, and vanished from view.

Hiccup stood, frozen in place, next to his father; barely able to process the possibility that his mother might actually be aliveâ€¦ after all these years!

**To be continuedâ€¦**

28. Chapter 28

Chapter Twenty- Eight

In the days following Byron's revelations, and departure, the werecat and his news had become one of the main topics of conversation: Lutharian, Hiccup's mother; It was everywhere.
>Hiccup was just glad to have something else to focus on; something

productive he could do... Every morning, he and the other Riders would clamber onto their dragon's backs, and they would set off for Dragonstone Island.
He, Astrid, Fishlegs, and their dragons were growing more accustomed to their new role as teachers; and their students were eager to learn, and making visible progress.

During their 'down time', they had even founded Berks' first full-contact, dragon- riding sport; The Dragon Races.

>To everyone's surprise, The Twins had come up with the original idea; crude, and unrefined though it was. Snotlout had built the 'sheep- launcher' " to prove that he "could invent stuff, too", in the hopes of "winning Astrid back" from Hiccup.<p>

Days passed like this, than weeks, than months.

****Part One " News from the North****

_Five months after the Werecats' departure" _

It was evening, of the last day of the fourth month since Byron gathered the other Werecats that had been on Berk, and the lot of them had left in search of the Alpha's Sanctuary " and to spread the word of their latest discovery to the _other Werecats_ in the Archipelagos.

Everyone had gathered in the Great Hall for what was expected to be a supper like any other. That changed when, thirty minutes into the meal, the doors to the hall were nudged inwards. A moment later, a 'voice' said, '_Knock- knock._'

>All conversation in the hall came to an abrupt halt; several people jumped, but interest in what the new arrival might have to say quickly overwhelmed the ripple of surprise that moved through the Great Hall.<p>

When Hiccup heard the voice, and saw the creature padding down the length of the hall, his eyes widened. "Byron?"

'_Hiccup_', the werecat inclined his head. He glanced around the hall, than returned his attention to Hiccup. '_Before you ask, no" We have yet to find any sign of the Alpha's Sanctuary, though our search has taken an " 'interesting' turn: As we made our way north, we began to encounter groups of men, claiming to be dragon- trappers, roaming the seas. My sister, Brianne, and I have been travelling together, and, between us, we've been able to eavesdrop on many of their conversations; what we've learned was both informative, and " troubling: Apparently their 'employer', someone by name of 'Drago', is building a 'dragon- army'_'...

>The werecat paused, apparently having noticed the look that passed between Stoick and Gobber; 'I take it you've heard the name 'Drago' before?'

Stoick sighed, and nodded, "Years ago " Long before we made our peace with the dragons, there was a great gathering of Chieftains; to discuss ways to end the wars" Into our midst there came a stranger, from a strange land... He claimed that he, Drago _Bludvist_, had devoted his life to freeing mankind from what he called 'the tyranny of dragons' He said that he, alone, could control the dragons; he alone could keep us safe " _if_ we chose to bow down, and follow him." He was silent for a moment, than continued; "The idea was so ridiculous we " we laughed; until he wrapped himself in his cloak

and cried 'then see how well you do without me!' â€¦ The rooftop suddenly burst into flames, and a swarm of armoured dragons descended upon usâ€¦ I â€¦ I was the only survivor."

When Stoick stopped speaking, the silence that followed lasted for several minutes; humans and dragons both seemed equally affected by the news.

Finally Byron, who had changed into human form and dressed without anyone noticing, said, "I seeâ€¦ The news is not all bad, however: On one occasion, I personally overheard a few of these 'trappers' complaining about an entire 'shipment' of dragons being freed by a 'mysterious dragon- rider'..." Byron glanced around the hall, a mischievous gleam in his eyes, "Would anyone like to guess what kind of dragon thisâ€¦ 'Individual' was riding?"

****Part Two: Dragon- Magic****

"It's her â€¦ Valka!" Stoick's eyes widened. "We should send boats; to help with the search, to free the dragons andâ€¦"

Byron raised an eyebrow, "I would advise against sending ships north, Chief Stoickâ€¦ for the time being, at least." Before anyone could ask why, the werecat continued, "There are already boats, and trappers, scouring the north; to scatter friends among foes would be a bad ideaâ€¦ Besides: the more of this region I see, the more it fits the Legend of Lutharianâ€¦ If he's anywhere, he's there; in the north- of- the- north."

Stoick frowned, "Then Hiccup and the more- experienced Riders can come as well; Lutharian wouldn't attack other dragons without first hearing them outâ€¦ Right?"

Byron turned to face Hiccup, "I believe Eragon told you about the Thirteen Riders who betrayed the First Order, and joined forces with Galbatorix; correct?"

Hiccup nodded, "He called them 'The Forsworn'â€¦"

Byron inclined his head, and turned back to Stoick, "Just because they are Dragons, and Riders, doesn't mean that Lutharian will accept that they are friends; He may know of your war, but not of the peaceâ€¦ It would be best that we, the werecats, bridge the gap: If one of us chances upon him, he would recognize us as werecats, and his own curiosity would demand that he hear us out; anyone else â€¦ if Lutharian even suspects that you're trying to deceive himâ€¦"

>He hesitated, then turned to Hiccup, "You said that Eragon told you something of The Forsworn; did he ever tell you what the dragons did when they learned that thirteen of their own had betrayed them? â€¦ Did he tell you of 'Du Namar Aurboda'?"<p>

Hiccup thought for a moment, translating the words, "'Du Namar Aurboda'â€¦" He frowned, "'The Banishing of The Names?"

"I guess that's a 'no'," Byron said. He thought for a moment, and then continued. "As you would already know, dragons can use magic â€¦ though not as humans would: Only when the need is immediate, and the dragon has sufficient inspiration, will the gift come to themâ€¦ When the dragons of the day learned that thirteen of their own had

turned against them, and were actively aiding Galbatorix, their anger was beyond descriptionâ€¦ Every dragon not of The Forsworn combined their strength, and cast a spell: together, they stripped the Thirteen of their Names."

Hiccup had a feeling this was a lot worse than it sounded, "What does that mean, exactly; to 'strip them of their names'?"

Byron's shoulders sagged, "Birth-names, nicknames, titlesâ€¦ This spell tore all of that away from The Thirteen's Dragons; everything that allowed them to function as intelligent, thinking creatures. It was said that at least four of these dragons, and as many Riders, went mad as a result â€¦ Even today, you might look at a list of their names, and â€" whether you try to read the names letter by letter, or all together, they are as gibberish; they have been permanently erased from historyâ€¦ 'Du Namar Aurboda'; The Banishing of The Names."

>"Lutharian is not that powerful, on his own, but even soâ€¦"

The silence that followed seemed to have no end; how long it actually lasted, no one could say. Finally, someone at one of the tables asked "If dragons are so powerful, why didn't they used their magic during the war? They could'veâ€¦" The speaker let the question fade to silence; he didn't need to.

It was Toothless who answered, "'I cannot speak for all dragons, but I didn't know we had the means to work such changes; not until Saphira began to instruct usâ€¦ Even if a northern- dragon cast a spell, I doubt they would have realized what they'd done; I didn'tâ€¦'"

>All eyes in the hall immediately fixed on Toothless. Before anyone could ask, Toothless turned to Hiccup, 'During the Battle of The Red Death; when you were knocked out of my saddle, and were falling towards the firestormâ€¦ By the time I righted myself, from the impact, you were halfway towards the flamesâ€¦ I didn't know how â€" what â€" I did; there was this rush of energy; I willed your fall to slow, long enough to catch up, andâ€¦ it worked.' The Night- Fury shook his head; "'I thought it was luck, butâ€¦'"

"I have seen many things, in many places, but 'luck'; 'Luck' is the sauce the vain pour on failure to hide the taste; while the modest use it to downplay their skill, so as not to discourage those with less experience." He considered the black dragon and his rider for a moment, then snatched up an empty goblet, said "Hiccup, catch!" and threw the heavy, clay mug!

"Whaâ€" Hiccup began, his hand already movingâ€¦ He caught the mug right-handed before he finished the word. " â€"at?"

The entire hall had gone silent, everyone staring at the mug in Hiccup's handâ€¦ Even Hiccup appeared momentarily surprised.

>Byron, however, smiled, "When was the last time you checked the tips of your ears, Rider?"<p>

**To be continuedâ€¦**

****Chapter Twenty- Nine****

****Part One " Scouting Mission****

The following morning, an hour before noon;

They left the following morning; Hiccup and on Toothless; Astrid on Stormfly, Stoick on Skullcrusher, Gobber on Grump, Damian on Solaris, Amara on Swiftwing, Gren on Grog, Kyra on Skyblaze, and Eric on Thorin. Not one to be left out of the action, Snotlout, Ruff, and Tuff also insisted on coming along; so Hookfang and The Twin's Zippleback joined them in the sky.

>Byron considered the spikes on the Monstrous Nightmare's back, and " after asking for and receiving permission, had leapt onto the dragon's back, curled up around one of the spikes, and gone to sleep.<p>

Fishlegs and Meatlug stayed behind, to keep an eye on the other Rider- Dragon pairs; making sure that none of them tried to follow. Hiccup's instructions, before leaving, had been for them to practice 'listening to the voices of the forest'.

>Fishlegs was particularly good at this, so when he told their newest students that "I'll know if you try to sneak off" they knew that he meant it. The new- students weren't happy about it, but they wouldn't be going anywhere.<p>

The twelve dragons flew due north for a little over three hours; covering more distance than the werecats had, during their search-to- date. To be fair, though, the werecats were searching for _information on_ the Alpha's Sanctuary, as well as its actual _location_; which meant eavesdrop on conversations that might, or might not, hold a clue that would aid their search; setting time aside to hunt; and plain- old travel- time.

>As they flew over a stretch of forest next to a lake, Byron spotted something, and let out a series of growls and yowls" A moment later, the rest of them saw it too: another werecat had stopped by the shores of the lake, to take a drink.<p>

The werecat's head jerked up from the pond, and looked around in apparent surprise. When, at last, it looked up, Byron waved a paw.

>A moment later, the werecat's mind brushed against theirs, '*THAT'S CHEATING, BROTHER!*' Immediately, she began to run in the direction in which they were flying.

"Is that your sister, Brianne?" Hiccup asked; glancing back at Byron, who nodded. "Shouldn't we" | "

****Part Two " Byron & Brianne; An Exchange of Information****

Byron thought about it, '_Probably, yes; She can get a little cross, sometimes" I hear she met one of your farmers, a few nights before you met me... A word of advice: We werecats, in general, tend to be more active at night, but my sis is not what you'd call "an evening person"_'.

After a brief pause, Astrid said, "We'll get her; be right back" Stormfly dropped back, and, a few minutes later, she re-joined them; the second werecat curled up around one of Stormfly's neck-

spikes.

'_Hey, sis! Anything interesting happen since I left?_' Byron asked. As he spoke, the dragons began to circle in the air, so they could all hear the news.

'_Quite a lot, actually,_' Brianne said, smugly. '_But before I say another word, you're going to tell me something: Who's that mystery-rider we've been keeping such a close eye out for? You keep hinting that it's important, butâ€|_'

Byron rolled his eyes, sighed, and began to chant, '_Raven's Riddle born anew; Blagdon's secret now untrue. New Rider on the path once-walked, to seek the other Answer_.'

It was Brianne's turn to roll her eyes, '_Look; I like a good riddle as much as anyone; but couldn't you just __say__ that it's Hiccup's mother, next time?_'

'_Come on; what would be the fun in that?_' Byron asked. '_Your turn, Bri._'

Brianne hissed at him, but said, '_Valka and that Stormcutter of hers have 'stolen' another 'shipment' of dragons from those "trappers"â€|_' She hissed again, and wrinkled her nose, '_Those idiots need to stop hunting dragons and take a bath; seriouslyâ€| they smell worse than that one, no â€" not you, Hookfang._'

Snotlout sniggered, then he realized that Brianne was talking about _him_; "Wait... HEY!"

Astrid smiled, "I like her already!" Turning back to the werecat, she said, "May I?" Brianne nodded, regally, and Astrid began stroking the werecat's fur. Moments later, the werecat was purring likeâ€| well; like a cat.

Snotlout snorted, "Anyone could do that, Astrid; seeâ€|" Without a word to Byron, Snotlout turned in his saddle, and reached back towards the male- werecat.

Without opening his eyes, Byron said, '_Tell me, Snotlout; do you want me to rearrange your face for you, or would you rather keep it as it is now?_'

Snotlout immediately snatched his hand back. In an attempt to save his pride, he turned back to Astrid and added, "You know; if I wanted to."

Speaking so that only Astrid and Stormfly could hear her, Brianne said, '_My brother's not bad either, just don't tell him I said so; otherwise I'll never hear the end of it._' Astrid smiled, and winked at her. Brianne turned her attention back onto her brother, '_Your turn._'

Byron grew more serious, '_Apparently this "Drago" person has a history in the north; it seems he's already established control over some number of dragons, and is using them to bully people into following him._' He hissed, angrily. '_I don't like thisâ€|_'

'_You'll like this even less,' _Brianne said, '_More boats arrived last night; there must be two hundred, now; at leastâ€| this 'Drago' character has been busy!'"_

'**Is there any good news? '** Skyblaze asked, sounding a little on-edge.

'_There is,_' Brianne reassured them. Lifting a paw, she gestured ahead of them, '_The land stops about five miles past that line of hills. Every time I've seen the Valka and that Stormcutter, they've come from the east; that's the best place to look for this 'Alpha's Sanctuary'; all of Drago's boats turn to the westâ€| Both routes lead away from the land, so that's all I can say for sure._'

The Riders and Dragons shared a lookâ€| They'd left Berk only that morning, but it felt like so much had already happened.
>Turning in the direction Brianne had indicated, they set off towards the coast; keeping their eyes peeled for any sign of movement, friend of foe; and fully aware that an attack could come from any directionâ€|<p>

**To be continuedâ€|**

30. Chapter 30

Chapter Thirty

Their journey to the coast Brianne had described was uneventful, and took just over an hour. By then, the sun was beginning to set. Knowing that there would only be a few more hours of daylight left to them, they decided to make camp for the night.
>They caught fish, cooking some for the humans, but leaving most of it for their dragons. Just before they turned- in for the night, Hiccup and Astrid cast several of the wards that Eragon had taught them, both to keep their camp hidden, and to warn them if anyone was approaching their campsite. (They also sent a message back to Berk; to confirm that all was well.)<p>

The following morningâ€|

When they were ready to set off again, Hiccup turned to the others; "We need to split up: Astrid, I need you and Stormfly to take the others west, and scout- out Drago's campâ€| Don't confront them, just keep watch; see what you can find out." Gesturing to himself, Stoick, Gobber, and their dragons, Hiccup continued, "We'll head east, and look for the Alpha's Sanctuary."
>Before Astrid could protest, Hiccup reached out to her with his mind, 'I don't like it any more than you do, but I need your help, hereâ€| The sooner we go, the sooner we'll be back.'

Astrid signed, but nodded, "Be careful, Hiccup; we don't know what's out thereâ€|" Turning to the others, she said, "Lets go!"

'_A moment,_' Byron purred. '_If Toothless doesn't mind, I would continue on with him and Hiccup._' Toothless agreed, and moved closer to Hookfang; so Byron could leap onto his back.

Both groups turned their dragons to the east, and west, respectively,

and the distance between them gradually grew.

****Part One " The Alpha's Sanctuary****

Hiccup;

About an hour after parting company with the others, they saw their first few dragons. The further they flew, the more dragons began to gather around them. They seemed curious, but not overly surprised, to see humans riding dragons; Hiccup took this as a good sign.

>At the end of the first hour, a new dragon came into view; a Stormcutter, and on its back " Hiccup could tell, from their expressions, that they had seen it too; a human" A rider.<p>

As they drew closer, they began to make out more details: the other rider's face was hidden behind a mask, but Stoick seemed to have no doubt; "Valka."

>The word was little more than a whisper, but the rider suddenly turned in their direction, and noticed them. Despite the distance still separating them, they saw the other rider tense. The dragon, too, paused; uncertainly" The rider took a deep breath, then murmur something to the dragon; who continued forward.<p>

After a few minutes, the distance between them had reduced to a mere twenty feet" The figure riding the Stormcutter was clad in a long-sleeve yellow tunic and chest- plate, an orange belt, and pants that had a 'layered' look to them. An armband decorated each arm, and spikes extended out the sides of the rider's boots. Then there was the 'mask', which also seemed to double- over as a helmet" A number of spikes rose from the top, and two 'tusks' extended out to either side.

>The rider still appeared 'wary' of Stoick, but the closer they got, the more focussed the figure became on Hiccup. Finally, the figure said, "Hiccup" Can " Can it be?"<p>

Almost without meaning to, Hiccup said "Mom"?"

The figure immediately removed her mask; revealing a face that Hiccup somehow recognized, despite the fact that he'd never seen it before" The woman, his mother, glanced back to where Stoick and Gobber sat, atop their dragons.

>She looked away just quickly, her eyes scanning the ocean, and land, beneath them. Finally, she said, "It isn't safe out her" Follow me; quickly!"<p>

For the next half hour, they flew in a north- easterly direction. Finally, on the horizon, they saw an icy structure rising up, out of the ocean: massive columns of ice jutting out in every direction.

Once their dragons had set down, and the riders had dismounted, Stoick began to make his way towards Valka and her dragon. He opened his mouth to speak, but before he could, Valka said, "I know what you're going to say, Stoick: How could I have done this" how could I have stayed away all these years " why didn't I come back to you, to our son?" Her voice quavered, but she continued, "Well; what sign did I have that you could change, that anyone on Berk could? I pleaded so many times to stop the fighting " to find another avenue, but could I make you listen?"

After several moments of silence, Valka said, "I â€¦ I know that I left you to raise Hiccup alone, but I thought that you'd be better off without meâ€¦" Stoick looked like he'd been slapped, but he continued forward. Valka's voice shook, "â€¦ and I was wrong â€¦" I see that now, butâ€¦ oh; stop being so stoic, Stoick; go onâ€¦ Shout; scream; say something!"

Stoick placed a hand, lightly, on Valka's cheek, and said, "You're as beautiful as the day I lost youâ€¦" They could hear the emotion in his face; sadness, regret, reliefâ€¦ Something in Valka's expression seemed to relax, and Hiccup's parents embraced.
>When the two of them separated, Valka took a moment to consider Hiccup, Stoick, Gobber, and their dragons. Finally, she asked "How did this happen?"<p>

Hiccup, Stoick, and Gobber exchanged a look, and then Hiccup began to talk. He told his mother about how he'd 'met' Toothless; the Battle of the Red Death; and everything else that had happened since. He described his and the others' initial encounter with Byron, but when he mentioned the name 'Lutharian', Valka's eyes widened.

Byron appeared, a moment later, still in his animal form; '_You recognize that name, don't you?_'

Valka's eyes widened at the sight of Byron, but she nodded; "Come with me." She got to her feet, and led them into a tunnel, that extended back into the icy mass that rose above them.

They emerged, a few minutes later, into a massive cavernâ€¦ Above them, the air was full of dragons, flying in all directions. Perhaps fifty feet ahead of them, the land dropped away, into the bowl of a massive, fertile valley. Valka walked to the edge of the cliff, and gestured downwards.
>The others joined her, and their jaws droppedâ€¦ There, before them, lay a massive white dragon; a dragon of such massive proportions, it was hard to take in, and harder to describe.<p>

Then the dragon's eyes snapped open, and the creature rose to its feet; two massive tusks rose to either side, as the creature lifted its head to consider them. As one, the new arrivals â€¦ dragon and human both, bowed to the massive, white dragon. Then Lutharian's mind touched theirs, and the dragon said, ***_**HUMANS AND DRAGONSâ€¦ THE RUMORS ARE TRUE, THEN.**_***

Hiccup hesitated for a moment, than asked, "Rumours?"

Amusement coloured Lutharian's 'voice', ***_**DID YOU THINK I WOULD NOT KNOW OF YOUR VICTORY OVER THE RED- DEATH, YOUNGLINGS? MANY OF THE DRAGONS YOU FREED, THAT DAY, THOSE WHO KNEW THE WAY, AT LEAST; CAME HERE, BRINGING THEIR NEWS WITH THEMâ€¦ WE ARE WELL-MET; HICcup AND TOOTHLESS, PEACEMAKERS', BOTH. **_*** The white dragon considered them for a long moment, then continued, ***_**THE CONNECTION YOU SHARE ISâ€¦ DEEPER THAN I WOULD EXPECT FROM MERE ACQUAINTANCES; SHOW ME YOUR HAND, RIDER.'**_

Hiccup didn't need to ask which hand. He pulled off his glove, and held up his right hand for Lutharian's inspection. The dragon brought his head down to their level, and considered the Mark of the Riders. A moment later, he rose to his full height. ***_**I SEEâ€¦ I WOULD KNOW EXACTLY HOW THIS CAME TO HAPPEN; AND, AS THE TWO ARE DOUBTLESSLY

RELATED, HOW A WERECAT CAME TO BE SO FAR NORTH.**_**'***

Before Byron could do more than open his mouth, a sudden flare of heat made Hiccup wince; a reaction that the others immediately noticed. When asked, Hiccup produced a disk of metal from a pouch on his belt, inscribed with runes from the Ancient- Language; "This is part of a pair; Astrid has the other oneâ€¦ We placed spells on them to warn the other when one of us is in dangerâ€¦ Something's wrong!"

Part Two â€" Davosk

Astrid;

Since they'd parted from Hiccup, Stoick, and Gobber, Astrid and those with her had kept close to the sea, or ground, as the case might be. They knew that the higher up they were, the greater the chance that their enemies might see them coming.

After, perhaps, an hour and a half in the air, Amara had spotted a small group of boats, travelling in the same direction as they were, but some distance ahead of them. Snotlout wanted to fly in, and "kick some butts", but Astrid wouldn't relent. "Hiccup told us to '_scout-out Drago's camp_', and '_not to confront_' them â€" specificallyâ€¦ We'll follow them, and we'll keep watch; that's it."

Two hours later...

For a time, they followed the boats, careful to keep to a safe distance. Finally, they saw an opening; the entrance to what would be a massive ice- cavern, several miles ahead of them.

"Finally," Snotlout snorted. "Can weâ€¦"

"No," Astrid cut him off. "We wait till they've gone in, than find a spot to lie low until Hiccup joins us."

Once she'd decided that a reasonable amount of time had elapsed, Astrid signalled, and the dragons began to drift towards the opening to the cavern. As they entered the main part of the cavern, a snow bank rose on their immediate left. From the top, they would have an excellent view of the rest of the cavern.

The riders slid down from their dragons, and scampered up to the top of the slope. What they saw, from their new vantage point, was daunting: Row upon row of ships, around two- hundred fifty, by Astrid's count.

A sudden noise from behind them made them spin around: dozens of men now encircled their dragons, shooting some kind of darts at them! The darts _should_ have either frozen, or been redirected, but they hit their targets! One by one, their dragons fell to the ground; Unconsciousâ€¦

Aware that they wouldn't be able to fight their way out of this, Astrid triggered the spells bound to the coin Hiccup had given her, signalling that they needed help. She also cast a spell to hide her sword, to ensure that it wouldn't be taken from her. She glanced around for some sign of Brianne, but caught only a flicker of movement; the gleam of a pair of eyesâ€¦ The werecat placed a paw

across her lips, as a human might a finger, and melted into the shadows.

Five minutes later, they were being marched down a lane that separated two portions of Drago's army, as the man at the head of the group shouted for Drago. Behind them, their dragons had been loaded onto a cart, pulled by two armoured and chained dragons.

A man stepped out of the shadows; a man who matched the description Stoick had given perfectly: this was Drago Bludvist.

Knowing that killing Drago might end the war before it began, Astrid cast a spell to make one of the warrior's spears leap out of the man's hand, and launch itself at Drago... The spear flew out of the man's hand, and launched itself at Drago; but the tip froze a foot from his chest, then it clattered to the floor.

"Not bad, but you'll have to do better than that." Drago said, chuckling. He turned back to his men, "DAVOSK! â€| DAVOSK! â€| Where is that black- heartedâ€|?"

"No need for that," A new voice said. Off to one side, the crowd of men parted to allow a tall, thin figure through to the front of the press of men. He turned first to examine the dragons, and then he turned his gaze on the Riders.

Astrid's breath caught in her chest: The man's eyes were crimson, the skin of his face paleâ€| Before them, stood Davosk, and Davosk, was a Shade! She glanced around at her friends, and students; each of them were white- facedâ€| They knew what this meant.

In a motion that was almost too fast to follow, the Shade plucked something from an inner pocket of his robes, and hurled it at them! A moment later, a glass bottle shattered at their feet: scattering several dozen small, purple crystals around their feet. The stones seemed to move on their own volition, and, once they'd formed a perfect sphere, each stone shot tendrils of energy into the air. Seconds later, these tendrils swirled together, forming a dome; sealing them in!

Davosk turned back to the riders, "I've heard of you, Riders; the first members of the Northern Orderâ€|" He looked askance at Snotlout and the Twins, "Some of them, at least." He smiled, "I have never killed a Rider before, so I hope your friend on the Night- Fury proves to be a worthy opponent; deserving of that honour."

The air froze in Astrid's lungs: '_Davosk wants to kill Hiccup_â€|' she thought, '_and I've just called him here!_' Even as she thought this, she tried to reach out with her mind; to warn Hiccup of the danger, but the world outside of their purple- bubble felt as though it were miles away.

****Part Three â€" One Shall Fall****

Forty- five minutes laterâ€|

When one of Drago's lookouts reported that a black- dragon had been sighted, approaching from the east, Astrid's sense of fear deepened. She heard Drago tell the man to order the other lookouts to withdraw, and let the newcomers enter unchallenged, but the words seemed to

wash over her.

Amara, wide-eyed and white-faced, turned to her; "What do we do?" Her voice was little more than a whisper. Astrid could tell the others were listening in while trying not to show it.

Astrid took a deep breath and, in an equally low voice, said, "We wait; if anyone can do the impossible, Hiccup can."

Toothless shot into the cavern mere minutes after the last of the lookouts had fallen back, and landed about ten feet away from the dome of energy under which Astrid and the other Riders were trapped. Hiccup dismounted, and approached them.

"Hiccup; I am so sorry" Astrid began.

Hiccup gave her a reassuring smile. In a low voice, he said, "This isn't your fault, any of you; Like Eragon said: It's impossible to guard against every eventuality." He noticed Drago and Davosk, standing nearby, and his eyes widened for the briefest moment. Then his calm expression returned, "A Shade; this should be interesting."

"I am Davosk." The Shade drew his sword, "Does the thought of you facing your mortal- end truly 'interest' you? " I must admit: I am surprised."

Hiccup's calm expression didn't waver, "Actually; I was referring to the chances of my being able to earn the same title as our mentor, so near to the same age as he was when he first earned it 'Shadeslayer'; It has a nice ring to it, wouldn't you agree?" As Hiccup spoke, he too drew his sword.

Davosk gritted his teeth, and lunged; Hiccup sidestepped the blow, and smiled, "Really, Davosk? I thought Shades were supposed to be fast?" The Shade lunged again, and Hiccup intercepted the Shade's blade with his own.

This continued for two minutes. Five. Davosk launched attack after attack; which Hiccup either evaded or blocked. While Hiccup never took a wound, he seemed unable to do more than keep the Shade at bay. Every few strikes, Hiccup would toss an insult at the Shade; though this only enraged Davosk. Hiccup's wards stopped the Shade's next slash, and it also put an end to Hiccup's barrage of insults; from then on, he focused on defence.

The Shade began to grow smug, "You have no hope of defeating me! I'm just toy"

Before Davosk finished his sentence, Hiccup let go of 'Fury's hilt, and dropped to the ground. He placed his left hand on the cavern floor for balance, and pivoted. As he moved, he brought his legs together; transferring his momentum into a sideways rotation, as he fell. He caught Davosk in the back of the shins, and The Shade went down! An instant later, Hiccup caught Fury in a reverse-grip, and the point of the black-blade was speeding towards Davosk's unprotected chest!

>Mere seconds before Hiccup's blade could impale Davosk through the heart, the Shade recovered, and rolled out of the way. A moment later, he was back on his feet.<p>

Astrid resisted the urge to groan aloud; Damian and Gren actually did: It had been so close! " And Astrid had a sinking feeling that Davosk wouldn't underestimate Hiccup again.

The Shade's eyes narrowed, "How did you? No human should've been able to."

Hiccup allowed himself a small smile, and pushed back his hair; showing Davosk the tips of his ears. The Shade stumbled back a step, clearly caught off guard. For a full five seconds, his mouth hung open.

Hiccup smiled, "What's the matter, Davosk; _Spirits_ got your tongue?"

The Shade recovered, and glowered at Hiccup; "Pointed ears don't make you an elf; boy!"

Hiccup's smile never wavered, "Then I guess it's time for 'Plan- B!'" A patch of shadow rippled behind Davosk, and the werecat, Brianne, pounced! Her claws sank into Davosk's shoulders, and then she vaulted free.

Davosk had, instinctively, spun his sword in his hand; securing a reverse grip on his pommel, and moved to stab at the creature he'd expected to find still clawing at his neck and back. By the time Davosk realized his mistake; it was too late.
>Hiccup lunged forward, and stabbed Davosk, through the heart.<p>

Davosk's blade clattered to the ground; he brought one hand up to the wound, and seemed almost surprised to find blood on his fingers. "You? You?" he stammered.
>Before he could finish his sentence, Davosk's skin turned transparent. For the first time; the glowing orbs, the spirits imprisoned within the Shade, were visible to all; eighteen orbs, each pulsing angry shades of orange, red, green, purple, and black.

Then the orbs began to grow in size, and Davosk let out a piercing wail, as his skin split along the bellies of his muscles. With a thoroughness that emphasized an unnatural knowledge of how living creatures were put- together, the Spirits tore Davosk apart.
Then they arched off in different directions, passing through the walls and ceilings as though the stone and rock was insubstantial.

The moment they were gone, the crystals that surrounded Astrid, Amara, Gren, Damian, Kyra, Eric, Snotlout, Ruff and Tuff, shattered.

>Astrid's first thought was that the spells bound to the stones must have drawn their power from the Shade himself; and could not outlast the destruction of their master. A moment later, she felt a sudden decrease in her strength; and she could tell from the others " those with wards, at least; felt the same way. An instant later, she understood: Davosk's final spell was designed to weaken, or remove, the wards of any spell-caster they snared; making them easier to kill, even if they managed to break free.<p>

An instant later, Hiccup was next to them; "We've got to go, now!" He turned his attention to their dragons and, speaking in the Ancient-

Language, said, "Wake!" Immediately, their dragons shot to their feet, angry growls echoing throughout the chamber. Toothless hurried to Hiccup's side, while the rest of the Riders and Dragons rushed back to their respective partners

The dragons were rising into the air; making for the cavern entrance with all possible haste. Behind them, they heard Drago bellowing orders to his men: "First was 'Shoot them down! Shoot them down!' Then came orders for 'the rest of you' to prepare for immediate departure to Berk; 'We must strike before they recover their strength!'"

>When they saw the first wave of archers raising their bows, Brianne said 'Cover your ears!' The humans immediately covered their ears with their hands, while their dragons sealed off their ear-canal. The second they were ready, Brianne unleashed an ear-piercing series of yowls; which echoed off the cavern walls. The few arrows that were launched went wide, and shouts of pain rose after them, as the dragons rose into the open sky.

****Part Four "Return to The Sanctuary****

When they were a safe distance from the entrance to Drago's caver, Astrid glanced behind them. What she saw was not encouraging: Ships were already setting sail, and they were making surprisingly good time. Then she noticed chains extending into the water, and the occasional glimpse of a creature rising to the surface before vanishing back beneath the waves: "Of course," she thought, bitterly. "Drago's enslaved some Scauldrons to pull his ships!"

Kyra's voice jolted her out of her reverie, "Hiccup; you've killed a Shade!" No one spoke for a long moment; as the reality of this fully registered in the minds of both riders and dragons.

"With help," Hiccup amended, though they could tell that he was proud of the feat; he had every reason to be. He nodded to the werecat, Brianne, as he spoke. The werecat smiled in acknowledgement.

They flew west, in silence, until they saw a familiar landmark below them; the river they'd followed north, after their rendezvous with Brianne. When Hiccup made no move to turn south, Gren said "Uh! Aren't we going back to Berk?" Drago said:

Hiccup glanced back, "We've got to make a stop first." As he spoke, Toothless slowed and began to circle. The other dragons, taking their cue from him, did the same.

Astrid's eyes widened: so much had happened in the past few hours, their initial reason for coming north had completely slipped her mind. "The Sanctuary? Your mother?"

"And Lutharian; he's there too," Hiccup said, nodding. "So before we go the rest of the way, a quick heads-up: Lutharian does know about the Dragon War; some of the dragons we freed from the Red-Death knew the way to The Sanctuary, and came north; with news of the war, and, fortunately for us, rumours that we were already actively-working to make peace with the dragons. Between the two, and since he knew my mother; Lutharian chose to give us the benefit of the doubt. Still, it would be better for us to not talk about The Wars, while he's around; just to be safe."

Toothless spoke up, **_'Lutharian won't be so _**understanding**_'** with Drago, though; when he finds out about those chained dragonsâ€| **_'** The Night- Fury let his sentence drift to silence, but that silence said more than any words would have: Drago, was in _serious_ trouble.**

"I know." Hiccup said. "But he will want to know, and sooner rather than later."

A short time later, the others got their first look at the icy structure, as it appeared on the horizon. The closer they got, the larger it grew. Since they were approaching from a slightly different direction from the previous time Hiccup and Toothless had visited The Sanctuary, they used one of the other tunnel entrances.

****Part Five â€" The Rage of Lutharian****

This tunnel deposited them about fifty feet above the floor of the bowl- shaped valley. The dragons' set- down, and both they and their riders looked around, taking in the scene around them. The countless other dragons that filled the air above them quickly took notice of their arrival, and many began to settle on near- by ledges, in alcoves, or anywhere else they could find; others remained in the air.

Perhaps a hundred feet ahead of them, and seventy feet to their right, a massive, whiteâ€| 'Structure' rose from the earth. Gren frowned at it for a moment, then, in a low voice, he asked, "What is that?"

Amara considered it for a moment, "It's big enough to be a glacier, but there's no other ice or snow in hereâ€|" Nodding towards a 'slope' that curved around the near side of the mound, and vanished from view, she continued, "That looks kind of like a ramp; maybe it used to be a templeâ€|" She turned to Hiccup, and asked, "Doâ€| you know what this is?"

Hiccup managed a smile, "Not 'what'; 'who'â€|" He moved to the head of the head of the group, gave a short bow to the 'structure', and, in the Ancient- Language, said, "Lutharian; we have returned." >As he spoke, the 'structure' shifted; the 'ramp' Amara had pointed out began to move; the visible part growing narrower, as the dragon turned to face them.<p>

Than a massive head rose into view, looming over them. A vast, ancient mind brushed against theirs, and Lutharian said, **_'**_**SO I SEE; HICCUP, TOOTHLESS â€| AND WITH FRIENDS, TOO.**_**_'** Amusement coloured his thoughts, as he considered the other humans and dragons, all of whom were standing stock-still; wide- eyed, and open-mouthed.

Hiccup nodded, and made the introductions. As each rider and dragon was introduced, they bowed, as Hiccup had. By the time he'd finished, Stoick, Valka, Gobber and their dragons, which had noticed the activity, joined them; The arrival of Hiccup's mother, of course, lead to another round of introductions.

Once the formalities had been observed, Hiccup said; "We also bring news, and you won't like it."

Hiccup began his account by his and Toothless's trip from The Sanctuary to Drago's camp, which had been uneventful. From there, he described his fight with the Shade, Davosk; Lutharian seemed impressed, as were Hiccup's parents and Gobber... once they'd gotten over the shock, that is.

>Finally, only one topic remained: The chained and armoured dragons that Drago had enslaved. Hiccup began by explaining how dragons on Berk would often pull wagons of fish, and produce from the farms "as a means to contribute to local food- production, of which they would later claim a fair share" From there, he went on to describe how Drago had mistreated 'his dragons'. (Hiccup, they could tell, wanted to be sure how dragons contributed to life on Berk, before he learned of Drago's selfish cruelty; to prevent the Elder Dragon from drawing 'dangerous parallels' due to omissions in their explanation.)<p>

The moment Hiccup finished speaking, a low rumble shook the earth. As it increased in volume, Riders and Dragons realized that Lutharian was growling, **'**_**SOMEONE. TELL. ME. I. AM. MISHEARING. THIS: THIS" "DRAGO." CHAINS. DRAGONS. AND. USES. THEM. AS. TOOLS " BEASTS. OF. BURDEN**_**?'**** No one moved; No one spoke; No one contradicted Lutharian's summary.

Lutharian, The White Sentinel, and Last of The High Old- Ones, rose, slowly, but deliberately, to his feet. For the first time, he appeared fully awake; and he radiated both power, and anger" Deadly anger. **'**_**OVER. MY. WIND. RAVAGED. CORPSE" TWO THOUSAND YEARS AGO, CURIOSITY LURED ME NORTHWARDS " TODAY. I. GO. SOUTH... DRAGO. WILL. ANSWER. FOR. THIS. OUTRAGE.'**_**

To be continued" ****

End
file.